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OR,
**Nick Peddie's Wild West
Inheritance.**

The Romance of Dead Man's Ranch.

BY LEON LEWIS,
AUTHOR OF "THE SILENT SLEUTHS," "THE
FLYING GLIM," "THE DEMON
STEER," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

LOST IN THE WILDERNESS.

"Lost! lost!
The awful conviction at last took possession of
the soul of Nicholas Peddie with such force that
he could no longer resist it.

He was in the midst of one of the greatest
wildernesses of wood, rock, and stream to be
found in the Rockies, but he knew not where,
and he hadn't the least clew to the direction to
be taken to make his way out.

All his knowledge was at fault.

He was in a region where the moss on the

IT WAS LIKE A FLYING INCARNATION OF TERROR AND HORROR, BUT THE CHIEF CAME DASH-
ING DOWN PAST THE SPOT WHICH HAD BEEN SO FATAL TO THE TWO ROLLING TAVERNS,

trees, the flight of birds, and the various other resources of the woodman, were as uncertain and meaningless as the direction of the wind itself.

For hours he had been wandering at random, now resorting to some vain theory, and now following some delusive hope, and changing his course with the frequency and abruptness of a man who is flurried and desperate, and thus absolutely negating all the good which could have possibly come from his efforts.

More than twenty-four hours had now passed since he saw a fellow-being of any sort, a human abode of any description, or even a trail.

He had seen only rattlesnakes, wolves, bears, buffaloes, antelopes, coyotes, and various other reptiles and animals peculiar to the great solitudes with which he had penetrated.

During two days and nights the sky had been constantly covered by such a canopy of clouds that he had seen neither sun, moon, nor stars.

Shower had succeeded shower, and rain had succeeded rain.

Not only had the traveler been constantly soaked from head to foot, but he had exhausted his scanty supply of provisions, and had been a whole day without other resource than a few wild berries.

It is scarcely necessary to say that the anguish he had endured and was enduring had left its trace upon him.

He was not only pale and wild-eyed, but he had exhausted a good share of his strength, and was now actually weak from the want of food.

As to the horse he was riding, it was literally on its last legs.

It had not undertaken for hours to go faster than a walk.

Again and again Nick had dismounted and walked miles by its side, in order to spare it, but he was now in almost as pitiful a condition as his steed.

Who was he? How came he there? What was he doing? He was a young New Yorker, of good blood and birth, who had been paying teller in a bank, and who had lost his health at that employment, and been advised to "rough it" a little in the open air, and even take a trip to the elevated plains of Colorado or New Mexico.

Two or three visits to Buffalo Bill's Wild West Entertainment had confirmed Nick in his desire to take a trip to the Rockies.

As good or bad luck would have it, Nick had seen in a leading journal, about that time, an advertisement of a "magnificent western ranch," which was to be sold cheap for cash by a real estate agent just around the corner.

A few inquiries, and Nick's fate was sealed!

There was a wild flavor about the very name of this distant piece of property which charmed him.

It was known as the "Dead Man's Ranch!"

The price, too, being only a few hundred dollars, there was little danger of incurring any great loss by the acquisition.

To pay a visit to this ranch, and stock it with fine cattle and horses, in the charge of a few trusty cowboys and herders, was just the sort of change he needed from the close confinement of the bank.

Even the president of the institution, who had seen the youth's face getting thinner and whiter, was not at all indisposed to grant him leave of absence for a few weeks or months, and promised to find a good place for him whenever he chose to return.

All these facts and circumstances proved such an irresistible combination that Nick could not resist them.

He bought the "Dead Man's Ranch," put the deed and a few thousand dollars in his pockets and started upon his journey.

Going as far as he could by rail, he purchased a fine horse and an outfit of arms and ammunition, and rode in the direction of his new acquisition, with all the hopefulness and happiness of a man who feels that he is making a necessary, instructive, and profitable change.

Alas for human illusions. And alas, especially, for the lies of land-agents, who know nothing of, and care as little, for the actual characteristics of the "fine properties" they are so eager to sell you!

It was no easy matter, on approaching the scene of action, for Nick to get track of the exact spot where his ranch was situated, although the agent had furnished him gratuitously with a little manuscript map of the property and of the region for miles around it.

After two or three false quests, however, in as many different directions, Nick at last got track of the real whereabouts of his future "stock-ranch," and rode toward it with renewed hope and ardor.

To be sure, his route was not very direct.

We must even affirm that it can be best described as a succession of erratic zig-zags, in consequence of mountains, canyons, rivers, and other natural features of the landscape which did not enter at all into the calculations of the young explorer, at the moment of setting out upon his adventurous journey.

As is so often the case, his pocket compass seemed a delusion and a snare, rather than a positive assistance.

Then, too, he had to turn aside six or eight miles at a time to secure lodging or a supply of provisions.

All these things made his actual progress so slow, if judged by the standard of a "bee-line," that Nick was more than a week on his journey, after taking leave of the railway, before he secured any actual prospects of soon reaching his destination.

By this time, as was inevitable, he was getting deep into the immense wilderness which lies stranded between two of our great Pacific railways—the Union and the Northern.

Even ranchers had become few and far between, and the last two or three Nick had encountered seemed lost for words to express their sentiments concerning his "dog-goned foolishness" in buying such a ranch and taking such a trip to find it.

The last of these cheerful croakers had told him that the ranch "wasn't worth the sixteenth quarter of nothing," and that he'd be a lucky man indeed if he ever emerged alive from the uninhabited deserts into which he was so rashly venturing.

The talk of this man had been wholly of "Injuns," wolves and starvation.

He had even added that his hut was the last Nick would see in that direction, and that he was about to go back to Ohio, so that there would be no use whatever, if the young traveler should get into a tight place, of sending or coming to him.

All these gloomy prognostications of disaster now crowded upon the mind of Nick Peddie, as his poor horse continued to totter onward at random.

In the absence of all clues to his true course and whereabouts, Nick had resorted to the last desperate expedient of travelers in like situation, and was allowing the animal to go where he would, in the hope that the instinct of the creature would do what all the reason and skill of its rider had failed to accomplish!

"He certainly can't go much further," exclaimed Nick, after a stumble from which the horse was barely able to recover himself. "I shall soon be not only lost, but dismounted. Alone in this wilderness, and without a mouthful to eat! And night will soon be here again—a night as black as Egyptian darkness! And what a night it'll be, with such creatures as *that* around me!"

The creature he referred to was a wolf, whose prolonged howls had suddenly fallen upon his hearing.

"What to do?" was Nick's thought.

If it is too much to say that he had reached the confines of hopelessness, it is certainly fair to say that he was keenly alive to the horrors and perils of his situation.

To be sure, if the worst came, he might pass the night in some tree-top.

Another night of hunger would hardly kill him.

On the morrow, too, he might be able to kill a bear or an antelope, by devoting his whole thought to that end—a measure he had been so far too agitated and flurried to accomplish.

As he finished these conclusions, his horse gave another lurch, as sudden and violent as that of a ship taken aback by a cyclone, and went down in a heap, giving the rider all he could do to get clear of him without injury.

And there lay the poor creature, as inert as the gravel beneath it.

A single glance was enough to tell Nick that the horse was dead.

The worst fears of the young explorer had now been realized.

He was lost and afoot.

No wonder there was something almost wild in the glances he cast into the darkening scene around him.

CHAPTER II.

THE HOUSE ON WHEELS.

A MOMENT Nick stood as if paralyzed, his gaze resting gloomily upon the faithful companion of his long journey.

What was now to be done?

Which way should he turn?

Evidently he could not remain where he was, although an impulse to that effect had occurred to him.

The scene around him was too open—too barren.

It possessed neither wood nor water.

His searching glance soon settled upon a great forest a few miles away, and he moved in that direction after taking a few effects from his saddle-bags, and settling his revolver anew in his belt, and securing firmly the rifle he had carried slung across his shoulders.

Once fairly in motion, the agitation of his thoughts caused him to walk rapidly, and the dead horse was promptly left out of sight behind him.

As he ascended the long, gradual slope leading to the great forest, he came to groups of trees and bushes, the transition from plain to forest increasing rapidly.

Two or three miles had been left behind the young pedestrian, when he suddenly started violently, rubbing his eyes and flushing with excitement.

"Ah, a sign of life at last!" he cried, peering through a gap in the tree-tops and quickening his steps. "Yonder is a house! Certainly it could not show up at a more desirable moment."

It's not easy, in fact, to realize what joy and relief there was in the glimpse which had thus been afforded to Nick of the distant dwelling.

To be sure, he lost sight of it almost as soon as he saw it, a group of tree-tops intervening, but he had noted carefully the direction in which he had seen it, and pressed forward with renewed vigor as also with the hope of speedily securing that relief of which he was so terribly in need.

What joy to feel that he was no longer alone!

He continued to look ahead, from time to time, as he thus pressed forward, and he even wondered that he did not catch another glimpse of the house he had seen, as he now and then encountered a rift in the trees through which, as it really seemed, it ought to be visible.

But this drawback to his joy did not particularly disturb him.

He had seen about where the house was, by relation with the forest, and in due course he reached the spot, in the full expectation of finding himself at the door of a house where he could find both food and shelter.

What a disappointment here awaited him!

Not a sign was seen of any dwelling!

It was in vain that he peered into all the open spaces around him, and then hastily explored the edge of the great forest.

Not a glimpse! not a trace!

He couldn't understand it.

A moment he stood as if dazed, clasping his hand to his forehead.

Could it be that one of those hallucinations which usually attend a prolonged fast had already taken possession of him?

Was he really the sport of an illusion?

Had the house he had seen been merely a phantom of his mind?

Fortunately, as he asked himself this question, his gaze rested upon the tracks of wheels and of a pair of horses.

Looking along the direction pointed out by these tracks, he realized that he had struck a rude trail.

Even this was something.

It was something, too, to feel that human beings had recently traversed that trail.

The freshness of the tracks suggested that the vehicle must have passed this spot about the time the young explorer caught his glimpse of a house.

In any case, he could do no less, under the circumstances in which he found himself, than accept the course pointed out to him.

He must follow this trail.

To reach this conclusion was to act upon it.

As new as he was to everything appertaining to the scout's profession, Nick did not fail to see that the wheels had left a profound imprint, and this fact indicated clearly enough that the vehicle was heavily loaded.

He concluded from that fact that it was probably a Government wagon, of the sort so generally employed throughout the Rockies in the transportation of freight.

Should such really be the case, it could be no difficult task for him to overtake it before dark.

Encouraged by this reflection, he summoned his jaded forces for a final effort, and pressed forward as rapidly as possible in the direction the vehicle had taken.

He had gone but a few hundred yards, however, when his gaze suddenly encountered a man in the garb of a hunter who had appeared in an opening among the bushes beside the trail and stood leaning on his rifle, while a couple of magnificent-looking horses nipped sundry tall sprigs of grass before them.

Did Nick ask himself who this man could be, or what sort of a man?

Did he even think of robbers, outlaws, or fugitives from justice?

Nothing of the kind!

His face seemingly flushed and glowed as if he had encountered his long-lost brother.

The mere sight of a human being at that moment was enough to thrill him with a profound gladness.

Saluting the unknown with a polite gesture, Nick pressed forward rapidly, and offered his hand.

"I was just wishing I could meet a fellow-being in these solitudes, stranger," was his first greeting.

"Well, that's me, pard," returned the unknown, shaking hands with a good-natured smile, even if it was a little cynical. "Glad to see you."

"Do you live hereabouts?" pursued Nick, with a keen glance around, in hopes of seeing the mysterious house which was eluding him.

"Not nearer than eight or ten miles," was the answer. "I've simply struck the trail while pursuing a bear. But you look used up, stranger! Let me offer you a drop of brandy and a cracker!"

How much this simple civility cheered Nick need not be stated.

"There seem to be few settlers in this vicinity," he remarked, after he had swallowed the brandy offered him and taken a bite or two

from one of those large crackers which are so common in the Rockies. "You are the first human being I've seen to-day."

"I do not wonder at that, pard," said the unknown, still smiling pleasantly. "Nor shall I be surprised if I should prove to be the last!"

"Oh, I hope not," cried Nick feelingly. "If ever a man wanted shelter and rest, I'm that man! Can you tell me how far we are from that house of which I caught a glimpse not long since?"

"About three miles, or possibly two," answered the unknown. "It passed here nearly three-quarters of an hour ago, just as my bear led me across the trail to the northward."

"Passed here?" repeated Nick, looking bewildered.

"Certainly, passed here. That house is on wheels, as you'll see for yourself, if you ever overtake it."

Nick stared at the unknown a few moments as if suspicious of a joke, but he was not long in gathering from the countenance before him that joking was out of the question.

"Really?" he then said. "How singular! But why are they moving it? and where is it going?"

"It's simply beating a retreat before the advancing march of civilization and settlement," explained the unknown, "or moving for some more vulgar and less creditable reason. At any rate, this is the eighth or tenth time it has moved within a year, or since it was built at Rockdale, a hundred miles northeast of us. Doubtless it was going no further to-day than it can go by daylight, which is as much as to say that it will stop in the edge of the Great Piney, or just about five miles from here."

"At a spot reached by this trail, of course," pursued Nick.

"Yes."

"What sort of a house is it?"

"Tis called the Rolling Tavern. It is a rum-shop and whisky hole of the worst description, and as such is respected and protected by everybody—white, black and red, for a hundred miles around!"

"How odd!" Nick could not help saying. "Is it well patronized?"

"Yes. A host of miners and hunters are always hanging about it, and also a good many red-skins—these latter tempted by 'fire-water,' just as flies are attracted by a molasses barrel. Never heard of this establishment?"

"Not till this moment."

"Then you must be a stranger in these parts?"

"Such is the fact, sir."

"From the East—no doubt?"

"Yes—from New York."

"You've lost your horse, I reckon?"

"Yes, sir. The fact is, I've been lost for the past twenty-four hours, and am frank enough to confess that I've had serious doubts for several hours past of ever seeing my way out."

"Indeed? What you tell me agrees with my first impressions. I saw at a glance that you were in trouble, and hence my offer of a little kindness. Have another swallow of brandy and another cracker."

Nick accepted, with excuses for the liberty he was taking. In all his life he had never felt the need of "bracing up" a little more severely than at that moment.

CHAPTER III.

A STRANGE RECOGNITION.

"MAY I ask what your business is?" resumed the unknown, after a brief pause.

"Certainly. I have been a banker's clerk, and my health has suffered from so much close confinement. Being advised to take a trip to the Rockies, I have secured a leave of absence for a few months, and am on my way to a section I have purchased in this neighborhood—a place called the Dead Man's Ranch."

"Thunder! you don't mean it?" cried the unknown, with a start.

"Yes, sir. What is there singular about that?"

"Well, several things, as you will in due course discover," and the unknown smiled indulgently. "To begin with, the place isn't worth a dollar, and it's near the headquarters of a band of robbers known as the Red Ransomers. Didn't you ever hear of them?"

"Oh, yes—for who hasn't? But I had no idea the Dead Man's Ranch is such a poor investment. My idea was to 'rough it' here a few months, and get rid of a sort of pulmonary tightness with which the doctors say I'm threatened. I thought of building a log-cabin, and of caring for a few head of horses and cattle."

"Well, you are out of your reckoning for once," assured the unknown. "A horse or a cow would die of starvation anywhere on your section. So much for buying land before you see it!"

"Well, the section cost me little, and it has afforded me an excuse for making a trip in this direction. I presume you live by hunting and trapping?"

The unknown nodded.

"Then I can come to you for lessons in that

line, if the Dead Man's Ranch should fail to afford me a living," declared Nick, as a smile illuminated the features which had, an hour before, been so pale and gloomy. "In any case, I do not feel inclined to grumble. If I can't live here, I can certainly return to the East. I suppose there is no danger that the Red Ransomers will interfere with me?"

"No, unless you interfere with them," and the unknown shouldered his rifle. "Have you in view any lodgings for the night, pard?"

"Only the Rolling Tavern. Who keeps it?"

"An old couple named Barter, who are assisted by their daughter. But I wouldn't go near the place, stranger, if I were you."

"No? Why not?"

"It's a den of assassins! Many a man has lost his life there. You'd better go home with me."

"Do you live in the direction of my ranch?"

"No. To the contrary, your ranch is in the direction the Rolling Tavern has gone and about a dozen miles from where the tavern will probably fetch up to-night."

"Then I think I'll reserve the pleasure of my visit to you for a few days," said Nick. "To be candid, what you have said has made me anxious to see for myself what there is at the mysterious tavern. There's no question, I suppose, about my being able to get lodgings there?"

"Not at all. I've never known the Rolling Tavern to turn away anybody, whether white man or Injun, honest man or rascal."

"Thanks for the information. You're not going my way?"

"No, thank you, but I'm not going to let you continue your journey on foot. You see these two horses?"

Nick assented.

"Well, I am as careful of them as I would be of two children. When you come to know me, and why I am here, and all that, you will comprehend why I keep such magnificent horses always within reach of my hand. But, as much as I prize these fellows, and as many reasons as I have for being well mounted, I am going to let you have one of them till I see you again."

It was in vain that Nick protested against this kindness; he had to accept it.

"But how and when shall I return him?" he asked, as he leaped into the saddle.

"Oh, I'll see you at your ranch in a day or two. To be frank with you, I've been using your place occasionally for a few weeks past."

"You cannot go with me now, sir?"

"No, I am sorry to say; I'm too busy."

"Well, let me see you at the ranch at your earliest convenience. Meanwhile, a thousand thanks for your kindness. Good-day, sir."

The greeting was returned, and Nick Peddie resumed his journey.

"A queer man, but a nice one," he said to himself. "I needn't feel quite lost in this wilderness, after this meeting. Here are the traces of the Rolling Tavern," and he glanced at the trail beneath him. "All I have to do is to follow them!"

In the course of twenty minutes after leaving his new acquaintance, Nick again caught a glimpse of the Rolling Tavern, which was in the act of traversing the crest of a ridge at a considerable distance.

"There she rolls!" he exclaimed, with pleasant excitement, as he patted the neck of his horse. "We shall soon overhaul it."

The purpose was accomplished in due course, but not until the singular abode had been planted beside the trail for the night.

This house was long and narrow, and very much like the little buildings used by roving photographers, except that it possessed above the principal room a half-story which contained two snug sleeping-apartments.

A lean-to, which served alike as a bar and a kitchen, had been set up in the rear of the principal structure.

Two stout pairs of wheels, with pole and reach to match, were seen back of the lean-to, and still further to the rear stood a shed, near which were tethered several horses of good form and appearance.

A few trees were grouped around the encampment—as it may well be called—and the house itself stood upon six stout blocks of wood, at the distance of a few rods from the trail.

A lantern was already blazing brightly over the low doorway, the shades of night having begun to make their appearance.

"A queer structure," decided Nick, taking in the scene with a rapid glance or two. "That shed and that lean-to are made in sections, so as to be set up in half a minute. I may as well make a close acquaintance."

He rode up to the entrance and dismounted.

At the sounds of his arrival, an old woman of repulsive aspect made her appearance from within.

"Can I stay here to-night, madam?" questioned Nick.

The woman scanned him sharply.

"You can, if you're not too particular what you eat and where you sleep," she then answered. "Who are you?"

"Merely the new owner of the Dead Man's Ranch, who is on his way to take possession—"

"I see! Come in, sir. We can give you the

best in this region! My husband will take charge of your horse."

An old man of brawny frame and furtive glance hastened to present himself in response to the reference which had been made to him, and led Nick's horse away, while the traveler followed the old woman into the house.

The room in which he found himself was about nine feet by sixteen.

It contained a table and several chairs.

At the sides and one end were several bunks, some of them cut off from view by calico curtains.

Several small windows, with the door, served to light the interior.

From the center of the low ceiling was suspended a lamp, which shed a gloomy light upon everything within the apartment.

Despite all his self-possession, Nick Peddie exhibited no little emotion as he scanned more particularly the features of the woman before him.

"I know you now," he said, with a smile that was not free from constraint.

"Know me?"

The voice of the woman showed that she was startled, as did her manner.

"Yes, you're Mrs. Pawler!"

At this unexpected announcement, the landlady opened her eyes widely, striving in vain to remain outwardly calm.

"Hush! Do not mention that name here!" she enjoined. "We are known here as Barter."

"I heard as much, as I came along the trail," admitted Nick. "But, you are none the less Mrs. Pawler, of Ironton, New York, where I've rusticated two or three summers!"

"And who are you, may I ask?" demanded the hostess, in a voice to which terror and excitement had given a strange shrillness.

"Nick Peddie."

The old woman recoiled a step or two, literally glaring at the young traveler.

"Sure enough," she muttered. "I am delighted to see you."

She offered her hand, which Nick accepted, after a struggle with himself which was not noticed, and then he went through the same formality with the husband, who returned at this moment from the shed to which Nick's horse had been conducted.

CHAPTER IV.

A WARM WELCOME.

"Yes, it's Nick, to be sure," muttered the old man, with an uneasy and suspicious glance from the door along the trail in both directions, as far as the darkness permitted. "So, you have come West, have you? How did you leave the folks in Ironton?"

"To be frank with you," replied Nick, as he took the chair offered to him, "I've not been in Ironton for many months past!"

The assurance gave the old couple intense relief, as Nick was quick to notice.

They began breathing naturally again, dismissing the hunted and scared look which had appeared temporarily in their eyes.

"You don't know of anything new in that quarter then?" resumed the hostess.

"Nothing to speak of."

"The folks talk there as meanly as ever about us, I suppose?" pursued the old woman.

"Talk! Naturally!"

"And what do they say?"

"You'll excuse me, I'm sure. Why should I repeat their remarks?"

"At least give us an idea of what they're talking about," pleaded Mrs. Barter, in a wheedling tone, as her husband slipped into the lean-to to replenish the fire in the cooking-stove.

"Do tell us now, Mr. Peddie!"

"I'd sooner take care of my horse or talk about your new house on wheels," answered Nick, smilingly. "Besides—"

"One word, please," interrupted Mrs. Barter, placing her arms akimbo. "Do they pretend to have made any discovery?"

"No, Mrs. Pawler—"

"Please call me Barter! For fear some one may overhear us, you know!"

She looked nervously around.

"Pawler or Barter—it's all the same to me," observed Nick.

"You can well understand why we changed our name on coming here from the East?"

"Oh, certainly."

"But, do tell me what the people of Ironton are saying about us!"

"Do you insist upon it?"

The woman assented nervously.

"Well, they say it's very singular they've not been able to find the body," declared Nick.

"That you and your husband killed the missing Canadian, at the little tavern you kept near Ironton, in the Adirondacks, no one in that neighborhood professes to doubt. So strong is this belief that various parties, at one time and another, have dug up nearly an acre of ground in the vicinity of your late residence, in a vain attempt to find some trace of the body!"

Mrs. Pawler flamed up angrily.

"The cursed villains!" she ejaculated. "They may dig until the day of judgment, and they'll never find the least trace of the missing man—never!"

The landlord uttered a chirping sound, which was evidently intended as a warning, and the old woman's countenance became livid, as if she had been betrayed into saying something she regretted. Dropping into a chair, she carried a handkerchief to her eyes.

"How shameful it is for those people to talk so about us!" she exclaimed. "It was not enough that we were obliged to leave Ironton, and sell our property there at a quarter of its value, and take ourselves off to a distance of two thousand miles. No, it was not enough that they broke our hearts and made us all this trouble, actually reducing us to beggary, but they must still keep up this hue and cry at our heels—"

"Excuse me, madam," interrupted Nick. "Am I not the only person familiar with that Ironton history who has ever been seen hereabouts?"

"Yes, yes!"

"Then of course there's no hue and cry at your heels from that quarter," assured Nick. "No one in Ironton has taken the trouble to follow you, so far as I know, and in any case my encounter with you here is entirely an accident. I had no suspicion of your presence in this quarter of the world until my eyes rested upon you!"

The old woman dried her pretended tears on the instant.

"Are you traveling this way for business or for pleasure, Mr. Peddie?" she asked, scanning him searchingly.

"Upon both accounts, madam. My objective point is the Dead Man's Ranch, of which I am now the owner, as I told you."

The evident sincerity of the young traveler added not a little to the sense of relief the old couple had already experienced.

A very acceptable supper was soon placed before him, and he did not hesitate to render it ample justice, being satisfied from the general aspect of the situation that he could do so with safety.

"I know one person who will be more surprised than I am to see you here," remarked the old woman, as Nick neared the conclusion of his repast, "and that one is Mabel."

Nick pretended not to hear the remark, although it brought a singular expression of repulsion and disgust to his features.

"You remember Mabel, I presume?" resumed Mrs. Barter, with an apparent desire of making herself as agreeable as possible.

"Perfectly, madam," replied Nick, almost at a loss what to say. "She is well, I hope?"

"Yes, and as pretty as a picture. I don't see where she can be so late," and Mrs. Pawler looked anxiously from the door. "She went out to gather a handful of wild flowers—she is so very fond of them!"

Nick arose and lighted a cigar.

"I think I'll look after my horse," he said. "He's too fine an animal to be neglected."

And with this he walked out into the night.

Seating himself on a ridge overlooking the scene he had just left, he smoked his cigar and reflected earnestly about his situation and about these people of the Rolling Tavern.

Here was a family which had fled from the East under the gravest suspicion.

They had not merely changed their names, but their reputation was as bad in their new home as in their former one.

In both cases they were accused of keeping a trap in which travelers were murdered.

Should he remain over night in such company or not?

He had made it clear enough that he had no great amount of money on his person, and it would hardly be natural to kill him merely because he had known the family formerly.

True, there had been some feeling against him the previous summer on the part of Mrs. Pawler and her daughter.

The girl had "set her cap" for him during his last visit to the Adirondacks, and had received only mortification for her folly, but even this was not a situation that called for deadly vengeance.

As the Rolling Tavern was probably the only house within many miles, it seemed best for the young traveler to remain where he was, the more especially as it was desirable to keep his horse as fresh as possible.

Besides, it looked like a weakness to be scared before he was hurt.

Even taking the ground that the inn was a den of cut throats, it did not seem the part of a good citizen to fly at the first suggestion of peril.

He was well-armed, and might have a public duty to perform in the premises.

On the whole, therefore, he decided to pass the night at the mysterious dwelling.

He had barely reached this conclusion when a hand touched him gently upon the arm.

He turned to behold an old acquaintance—Miss Mabel Barter, otherwise Pawler!

The new-comer did not stand upon ceremony, but hastened to greet Nick as one greets an old friend.

"Why, Mr. Peddie!" she exclaimed. "When ma told me you'd come, I couldn't believe it!"

"But you see that I'm here," returned Nick,

arising and bowing. "Our meeting is as strange as accidental."

"Ma told me you had come out here for a stroll," said Mabel, beginning to pick to pieces nervously a bunch of wild flowers she had in her hand. "I could see for myself where you were, and so I have come out here to welcome you to the wild West."

"I'm greatly obliged, I'm sure!"

"So far as I can see in the darkness, you have not changed an atom."

"Nor have you, Miss Pawler—I mean Miss Barter."

The countenance of Mabel clouded; her form swayed impatiently.

"Call me Mabel, please," she said, "and then it will not matter about that awkward change of name. The idea of that change was mother's. She thought we had been lied about so cruelly in Ironton that I would never be able to get a husband if I stuck to the name of Pawler. But you know what says the great poet: 'A rose by any other name,' and so forth. Ma tells me you are going on to the Dead Man's Ranch?"

"Yes, I've bought that place."

"Delighted to hear it! We shall almost be neighbors. Are you traveling alone?"

Nick assented.

"You—you are still unmarried then?" faltered the girl, with an interest she could not conceal.

"Oh, yes—and you?"

Mabel sighed as if her lungs had suddenly been changed into a pair of blacksmith's bellows.

"I'm still cherishing my ideal," she simpered—the bright magic of—of last summer."

"But in such a new country as this," suggested Nick, pretending not to see the point of her remarks, "I should think your hand ought to be in great demand."

"True enough," smirked Mabel. "I presume every desirable single man within a hundred miles has endeavored to pay me attention."

"Speaking of paying attention," said Nick, throwing away the stump of his cigar, "it is time for me to be looking after my horse. He ought to have some water. I suppose we are encamped near a spring or brook?"

"Certainly. Permit me to show you. I'll bring a lantern from the house, and we'll look after the horse together."

She paid no attention to Nick's repudiation of this programme, but hastened to get a lantern and lead the way to the shed.

She was tall, lithe and strong, showing in her every look and movement the effects of good living and an out-of-doors existence.

But her glances were bold; her features almost stern in their forced repose; and the corners of her mouth were habitually drawn in grim angles, as if she had learned to look with hatred and scorn upon everything and everybody.

There was nothing womanly and refined about her, either mentally or physically.

Altogether she had an air and appearance very much in keeping with the rude and rustic features of the wilderness around her.

CHAPTER V.

THE CROW CHIEF'S BONANZA.

THE couple had barely given the necessary attention to Nick's horse, Mabel holding the lantern, when two rough-looking men, evidently hunters, made their appearance, with many a rude greeting and exclamation, at the entrance of the Rolling Tavern.

"There are two men who have been sweet on me," simpered Mabel, with a flash of excitement. "They've almost quarreled with each other about me, but I told them I would never speak to either of them again if I saw any more actions of that nature. Gracious! You should have seen them wilt at my threat! They are here for the night."

"Do they live hereabouts?"

"No. They belong up in the mountains, near the new mines, but they seem to have a great deal of business along the trail. At any rate, they are constantly going and coming. See! it never rains but it pours! Yonder are some redskins—four of them—who will also pass the night at the tavern."

Nick regarded the new-comers with more than passing interest.

"Some folks are as friendly with one color as with another, I suppose?" he queried, looking sharply from the four stalwart savages to his companion.

"Oh, we have to be! We take good care to serve everybody, and to give no offense to any one. This is the only way in which we could exist here. See! what was I saying? Yonder comes a wagon-load of miners returning eastward from the mountains."

She quietly extinguished the light of her lantern, and added:

"There is no occasion to call any of them this way by showing the light. There are two or three rough customers in that last batch. There is even one I am actually afraid of."

"And why, if you please?"

"Because he's mad at my late refusal to marry him! He's a nice man enough in his way, and he has a handsome cabin up in the hills, but—I was made, Nicholas, to never love but once!"

And again she sighed deeply.

If Nick had not been so preoccupied with the new arrivals at the Rolling Tavern, he would have been rendered decidedly uncomfortable by the conduct of Mabel, who had evidently conceived for him a more absorbing passion than ever.

He noticed her close allusions, to be sure, but he was determined not to make any response to them, if he could help it.

"Ah! what have we here?" he demanded, after a brief silence, as a distinguished looking red-skin, evidently a chief, came dashing up to the entrance of the tavern.

Mabel started, with an exclamation of surprise and delight at sight of him.

"That is the famous chief of the Crows," she replied. "His name is Sword Bearer!"

"Indeed! I've heard of him. He seems to be a new edition of Sitting Bull. From all I have heard in the papers, he is a man of great powers and influence among his people."

"Oh, yes. He could put hundreds of braves on the war-path within twenty-four hours if he had any occasion to do so. He claims the land we are now on and for hundreds of miles around us. He has a retreat about thirty miles from here which is called Sword Bearer's Roost, which is said to be one of the most natural fortresses to be found on the continent. This Roost is the top of a high butte which towers hundreds of feet above its surroundings, and can only be reached by an almost perpendicular path where only one man can pass at a time!"

"How curious! I'd like to see the said 'Roost.' Have you been there?"

"Not yet, but Sword Bearer is very anxious to have me pay him a visit."

"You know him, then?"

"Oh, of course, as he comes here very often for his whisky. He has long been drinking a gallon a day—he and his braves."

"At a good round price I presume?"

"Yes, ten dollars a gallon!"

"And cash, at that?"

"Certainly—the best of greenbacks and gold certificates. You have no idea how rich that man is, or, at any rate, how much money he has in his possession. He talked the other day of millions!"

"I should be afraid he had taken a 'drop too much' on that occasion," suggested Nick, dryly, although with an interest he did not seek to conceal.

"He had been drinking deeply, to be sure," avowed Mabel, "but, on the other hand, he was talking confidentially—to me alone—and as he would talk to no one else!"

"Why, how's that?"

"Oh, Sword Bearer is sweet on me—more so even than all the rest. He really seems possessed for a week past. He's not only here every day, but he hangs around for hours, availing himself of every chance he can get to exchange a word with me."

"But he must have plenty of wives at the Roost!" suggested Nick.

"No doubt of that, but he is anxious to make me a queen over them, and has offered me a million in cash if I will marry him!"

Nick concealed his disgust, and contented himself with saying:

"If I were you, I should ask to first see the money!"

"The very answer I made to him, and he said I should see it to-night!"

"He did? Really? In all seriousness?" cried Nick, wondering.

"Yes, he did, and I fancy he is now here to see me in regard to that very matter!"

CHAPTER X.

A NEW CAVE OF ALADDIN!

THE voice of Mrs. Barter was heard calling from the rear of the Rolling Tavern at this moment:

"Mabel! Mabel! Where are you?"

"Here, mamma! Do you want me?"

"Yes. Come here, please!"

The girl turned to Nick.

"I understand what's wanted," she said. "Sword Bearer wants to see me! Will you excuse me a little while, Nicholas?"

"Certainly—certainly!"

"But I mean, will you be here when I come back?"

Nick hesitated as to his answer.

"If you will," added Mabel, hurriedly, "I will tell you what Sword Bearer was to say to me."

The promise was quite enough to govern Nick under the circumstances.

"I will stay here till you come back," he declared, "right here, where I am at this moment."

"That is right—thank you! I shall be pleased if you keep out of the house until some of these guzzlers—or all of them—have filled themselves with their favorite 'fire-waters' and gone to bed. Adieu for a few minutes!"

As she said this, she threw her arms around Nick and gave him a hearty kiss before he was really alive to what she was doing, and away she went like a flash toward the tavern, soon becoming visible to its occupants.

"Ah, there you are, Star Eyes!" cried Sword

Bearer at sight of Mabel, as she reached the door of the lean-to, where he had seated himself with a glass of his favorite toddy. "The heart of Sword Bearer is glad. Once more he's a new man and a giant!"

He emptied his glass at a swallow, and gained his feet briskly, advancing to meet the object of his passion.

"May it ever be thus, great chief," returned Mabel, as she laid her hand with assumed coy confidingness in that of the visitor. "Star Eyes is glad too! Her heart is as light as a feather."

He drew her to his broad breast, and bestowed a resonant smack upon her forehead.

These things were heard and seen by Barter and his wife, but they well understood the little game their daughter was playing, and merely smiled a discreet approval.

A word only about Sword Bearer

He is probably the most capable red-man now in the Rockies, and certainly one who has the most influence with his people.

Sword Bearer is not only very intelligent and sagacious, but he has been so constantly in contact with the pale-faces from boyhood that he has taken upon himself all the characteristics of our so-called civilization.

He not only speaks the English language like a professor, but he can imbibe whisky with an ease and constancy which would do credit to the most thirsty Kentuckian.

Mabel Barter not only found him picturesque, but she had been wooed with such ardor and persistency that she had really become interested in him.

Had not Nick turned up at that moment, there is no telling what would have happened.

"I have come to show Star Eyes something that will make her heart still lighter," said the chief, as he placed her in a chair and stood looking down upon her with a countenance that was a picture of infatuation. "Shall we go now?"

"Go where, great chief?" whispered Mabel.

"To see the million of which we were speaking last evening!" answered Sword Bearer, in the same guarded tone.

"Pshaw! I was not serious! I was merely joking!"

"In any case, I have brought the money for you to look at!"

"Really? Where is it? Here?"

The chief shook his head.

"Not here," he answered, "but not far away. If you will come with me a few minutes—"

He finished with such a pleading look as he stroked her hand, that she could not have failed to understand the situation.

He was completely in her toils.

She could do anything with him.

Her slightest wish was a law to him.

"Very well. I will come!" she said.

She arose and whispered a few words in the ear of her mother, and then turned to Sword Bearer, accepting his proffered hand, and walking away with him to the spot where he had left his horse.

Leaping into his saddle, he drew her up gently behind him, and rode quietly away into the forest.

"You will not fret at the distance, Star Eyes?" he soon demanded.

"Certainly not," and she passed her two hands around his stalwart waist to steady herself. "I could go to the ends of the earth with you, Sword Bearer!"

"I give you as many thanks as there are stars in the sky," he said, in a voice husky with emotion, and she could feel his stout frame thrill with the ecstasy she caused him. "But it's scarcely a mile that we have to go. I merely wanted to keep the treasure out of sight of all those men at the tavern."

"That was wise, Sword Bearer!" returned Mabel. "The most of those men are neither your friends nor mine. Many of them wish to marry me, and as many as wish to marry me are envious of you!"

"I hope they'll all have reason to be envious before another moon," declared the chief, earnestly. "Need I say how glad I am to be alone with Star Eyes in the heart of the great forest? I was never, never so happy as at this moment!"

"Nor I, great chief. I will not be so wicked as to deny it."

The conversation was continued a few minutes in this exaggerated fashion—terribly in earnest on one side, and wholly assumed on the other—and then Sword Bearer drew rein.

"Here we are," he said, assisting Mabel to the ground and alighting. "I will hitch the horse here."

He suited the action to the word.

"How much further have we to go?" asked Mabel, with a nervous look around.

"Only a few steps—just across the brook."

"Ah! to the Ledge Cave?"

"Yes, that's what I think you call it."

The couple were soon in a small but snug cavern, and Sword Bearer produced a light, waving it around him.

"Look!" he smiled.

The girl actually gasped for breath.

A large piece of canvas had been spread at the inner side of the cave, and upon it had been

poured bushels of money—absolutely bushels—consisting of gold, greenbacks and silver.

CHAPTER VI.

A CHIEF'S LOVE AND A WOMAN'S HATE.

WHILE Mabel looked at the treasure in a sort of ecstatic wonder, Sword Bearer contemplated her with a keen and almost solemn interest—as a rapt devotee, in fact, might contemplate his idol.

"Is it all real?" asked the girl, when she could find her voice.

"Feel of it, and see!"

Kneeling beside the pile, she picked up some of the gold pieces and packages of greenbacks.

Perhaps she had some vague idea that the money was counterfeit, but she was too good a judge of the article not to see readily that it was genuine.

It had all evidently been in circulation, although most of the greenbacks were wrapped up in slips of brown paper, with the amount marked thereon, in the usual style of banks and bankers.

One of the packages she had in her hands was marked ten thousand dollars.

"How much is there here, great chief?" asked Mabel, as she dropped the pieces and packages, and arose, turning her most wheedling glance upon him.

"A little over a million."

"How came it here?"

"Some of my braves brought it!"

"Simply to show me?"

"That's all—as I promised."

"You needn't have taken so much risk and trouble—"

"There's no risk or trouble about it," assured Sword Bearer. "My braves brought it here because I told them to bring it here, and they'll take it away for the same reason."

Mabel looked nervously around again.

She comprehended that the "braves" in question were at no great distance, although she could not see them.

She averted her face from the glare of the light, for the reason that she was conscious of the appearance of a shadow on her forehead.

That shadow was born of the question and answer which had entered her soul:

"How did he come by it? Stolen, of course!"

"Is Star Eyes pleased?" asked Sword Bearer at this moment.

"Delighted! I never saw so much money before!"

"Would Star Eyes like to have it all for her own?"

"Have it, great chief? Of course I would!"

"Be my queen, and it shall be yours!"

"Your wife you mean?"

"Wife or queen, it's all the same!" declared the infatuated warrior.

"But you have many wives already!"

"That does not matter!"

"But they would be angry if you were to take me to the Roost!"

"You needn't go there! I'll build you a house fit for a queen, and you can live away from my people!"

The manner with which Mabel listened to these words attested that she had no intention of repudiating the proposition.

To the contrary, she had decided to lead the infatuated warrior to some sort of an agreement that would leave her in possession of the treasure; but she wanted time to elaborate some plan of securing the money without its possessor.

With a million at her disposal in almost any of the great centers of the world, what a career was before her!

"Is there no danger that the owner of the money may come for it?"

"Not the least!"

"Where is he?"

"He's dead!"

"Dead? How did he die?"

"The old chief killed him."

"Your predecessor?"

"Yes."

A tremor shook the girl's form, although she was by no means tender-hearted.

To hide it, she turned toward the entrance of the cave.

"Who was he?" she resumed.

"He was a New Yorker who had been in California twenty years, and who had made a vast fortune. He had not faith in banks, and exchange, and transfers in writing, but prepared to take the cash with him. He believed the Overland route to be safe, and so it would have been under ordinary circumstances. But the old chief had his spies at Salt Lake City and got track of him."

"And this is all he had?"

"Not the half of it!"

The girl stood lost in thought.

The tragedy involved in the matter was by no means an uncommon one, but it is very rare that one is so frankly and fully uncovered.

A hard, stern look soon gleamed from Mabel's eyes, and a singularly firm expression at the corners of her mouth.

She no longer had the least hesitation about robbing the robber.

All that remained was to invent some safe and sure plan to that end.

"Of course I do not want your money, great chief," she said, in the softest and most effective tones she could use, as she took his hand and looked up into his face with pretended timidity. "But I cannot be indifferent to all your kind words. Come to me to-morrow night at this hour, and I will give you my answer!"

"That's all I can ask, Star Eyes," said Sword Bearer, as he again drew her to his heart and kissed her. "And now to return to the tavern."

He led the way back to his horse, lifting the girl gently across the brook of which he had spoken.

"Will—the money be safe there, chief?" she asked, with a glance in the direction of the cave.

"It's no longer alone," he answered. "My braves are there with it."

He sprang into the saddle, again taking Mabel up behind him, and the couple were soon back at the tavern.

The first measure of Mabel after her return from the cave was to stir up a punch for her distinguished wooer, and to make it about twice as large and strong as usual.

While engaged in preparing this mixture, and coming and going behind the little table that served as a bar, she found occasion to give Mrs. Barter a brief account of what she had seen, and the mother in turn communicated the facts to her husband.

How polite this made the old couple to Sword Bearer can be imagined.

Waiting only long enough to get the chief in an extremely jolly and satisfied mood, Mabel excused herself for a few minutes and sauntered out to the spot where she had left Nicholas Peddie.

He arose at her approach.

"Has the wait seemed a long one?" she asked, laying her hand upon his arm with the freedom of an old acquaintance.

"Not at all," he answered. "I have been greatly interested in watching all the goings and comings that have taken place in your absence. As the Rolling Tavern has only arrived here to-night, how is it that all these people know just where to find you?"

"Easily enough. The movement has been contemplated for several days, and very naturally we have told all our customers just where would be the next stopping-place. Besides, when you think of the tempting supplies we furnish, you'll comprehend how quickly the news of any such movement gets buzzed around!"

"And how did you get on with Sword Bearer?" asked Nick, after a nod of comprehension for the information Mabel had given him.

"Oh, just as I expected."

"He showed you the million?"

"He did."

"Actual money? The real thing?"

"Yes, Nick, and he promised to give me the whole million if I will marry him!"

"But how can he marry you, with so many wives already?"

"Such a marriage would be quite legal from his point of view and for him, according to the usages and customs of his people!"

"Ah! so it would. I didn't think of that. It would be legal for him. But for you?"

"I haven't yet married him, or made any pretense of doing so," assured Mabel, with a playful toss of her head. "I haven't even decided what course I shall take in regard to my ardent suitor, but I am not quite decided to forego the pleasure of handling some of that money."

"How did he come by it?"

Mabel reported what the chief had told her, and then led the way to a rustic bench near at hand, bidding Nick he seated, and setting the example.

Sitting quietly there, silent and thoughtful, the couple saw about a dozen guests of various colors and kinds arrive at the inn and settle into their places for the night. Mr. Pawler and his wife were both as busy as bees—the one in getting supper for so many, and the other in taking care of their horses and in making himself generally useful.

"I'd no idea there were so many people on this trail," at length said Nick, disliking to remain alone so long with his companion, but at the same time shrinking from pushing himself into the motley crowd which had now gathered. "Where do they all come from? And how does it happen that they do not quarrel among themselves—at least some of those white trappers and hunters with those red-skins?"

"Oh, it's well understood that the Rolling Tavern is neutral ground," said Mabel, with a short, nervous laugh. "They come here to feed and sleep, and not to quarrel. But you see what a rude life this is for me. Do you wonder that I am at times almost wild with a sense of these surroundings, and that my thoughts go back to the happy days when—when we lived in Iron-ton?"

"Oh, that's not to be wondered at," returned Nick. "But one of these days you'll marry and settle down, in the midst of a scene that will be more congenial."

"I marry?" exclaimed Mabel, with a tragic air. "Never! There is only one man in the world who could ever be aught to me, and he is perfectly indifferent to the love I lavish upon him."

The declaration was so pointed that Nick stirred uneasily and then gained his feet.

He preferred to thrust himself into the midst of the motley throng at the inn, rather than remain alone longer with his companion.

"You are too young to talk in that way, Miss Pawler—too charming," he added, with a grimace that was happily veiled by the darkness. "Surely, you cannot have been so weak and foolish as to cherish a single thought of me, after the plain talk I have had with you in Ironton."

"Oh, dear, no; but—"

She hesitated, gasping for breath. Then she resumed:

"I have tried to forget you, and I thought I had succeeded. But I had reckoned without your presence. Now that you are again by my side—no matter by what accident or fate—the love of other days comes back to me in a perfect torrent."

She threw her arms around Nick as she ceased speaking, and clung to him as earnestly as if she intended to hold on to him forever.

"This is madness, Miss Pawler!" protested Nick, seeking to withdraw from her embrace; "nothing less than madness, not to speak of your conduct by a harsher name! Let us go to the house."

"One moment," pleaded Mabel, clinging to him. "Is it true that you are still unmarried?"

"Did I not say so? Why should I lie about it?"

"And—and you have never fallen in love with any girl?"

"Never; and it will be singular if I ever do, after a few such scenes as this!"

The excited woman at his side clung still more firmly to him.

"Then what is to prevent us from becoming husband and wife?" she asked, with a voice and mien which showed that she was almost beside herself. "Oh, Nick! you can never know how I love you! I know it is unmaidenly for me to talk in this way, but I can no longer keep silent under the terrible agonies I have suffered. You cannot imagine the awful cloud under which I am living," she added hurriedly, waving her hand toward the inn. "As an unmarried woman, I am constantly annoyed by these lawless people. Since you are going to the Dead Man's Ranch, take me with you as your wife. I will be a true wife to you—"

"Heavens! Don't carry this horrible scene further, Miss Pawler," interrupted Nick, finding his voice. "Have you thought how it looks?"

"Yes—yes! But I love you so wildly," cried Mabel, again throwing her arms around his neck. "Oh, do not cast me off! Do not despise me! We can be very happy! Have pity upon me!"

It cost Nick the exercise of nearly all his strength to tear himself clear of the girl's violent clutch, but he did not hesitate to put her forcibly from him.

"Enough of this," he then said. "If you were the last woman in the world, I could not marry you! The fact that I do not have a particle of affection for you—or even ordinary respect—is in itself an eternal barrier to the union you have so rashly proposed to me. I need say nothing, of course, of all the other opposing circumstances—the cloud resting upon your parents and so on! Let us drop this dreadful folly and drop it forever!"

"You will not marry me then?" she asked, with a sudden revulsion of feeling.

"Certainly not! Never!"

"You scorn and despise me?"

"I am in a fair way to do so if this business is not soon ended."

"Then you shall never be the husband of any other woman!" hissed Mabel, drawing her form erect and glaring at him with blazing and menacing eyes. "I will have you killed on the spot!"

Throwing herself upon the startled and unguarded youth, with the violence of a tigress, she clung to him tightly, and shouted with all the strength of her lungs:

"Help! Save me! Murder! murder!"

CHAPTER VII.

A FIENDISH REVENGE.

A GRAND rush from the inn followed.

A dozen men, Indians and trappers, with Pawler and his wife at their head, and a number of them carrying lanterns, hastened to the spot where those wild cries had arisen, and from which they still continued to come.

"Help! murder!" cried the cunning and infamous creature, as she clung to Nick, resisting all his efforts to break clear of her. "Save me!"

An instant later a dozen stout hands laid hold of Nick as savagely as if he had been a murderer.

"Because I refused his proposal of marriage," cried Mabel, panting for breath, "he made this horrible assault upon me!"

It was in vain that Nick protested, endeavoring to obtain a hearing—as vain as had been his resistance.

"We must have quick vengeance for this business," proposed an old trapper. "This hound must die on the instant. To the nearest tree with him!"

"Hold!" cried another. "That would be too merciful! Let's burn him alive!"

"One moment," proposed a third. "His horse is here in the shed. Let's tie him to the back of his horse in such a way that his spurs will prick the animal to the bone at every jump, and send him into the wilderness—another Mazeppa!"

"Hurrah! glorious!" was the answer, with deafening yells of approbation. "Quick! Let's to work! Our punishment must be prompt and certain!"

The horse of the accused was led forth in the midst of the most horrible menaces and imprecations.

Then Nick was lashed with stout ropes to the animal's back, the spur of his right foot imbedding itself in the flesh of the frightened steed, causing him to rear and plunge with all his might in his frantic efforts to escape.

"That will do, boys!" cried the old trapper who had been prominent in these proceedings.

"Let go of him and stand clear!"

The order was obeyed, the three or four men who had been necessary to restrain the maddened creature suddenly releasing their hold.

What a terrible rush was that which succeeded!

The horse vanished in the darkness as if impelled by ten thousand demons!

In a few brief moments the group of lynchers and the Rolling Tavern itself had been left out of sight behind.

Only the wild roar and rush of the horse's mad gallop fell upon his hearing.

His first apprehension was of being dashed against a tree, but the scene around him soon became less wooded and more open.

Under all the circumstances, therefore, Nick was not quite hopeless.

He believed the horse would eventually come to a halt from sheer exhaustion, and that he would then be able to extricate himself from the bonds in which he was so rigidly enveloped.

Minute after minute were rapidly left behind but not yet could Nick detect any alteration in the gait of his tortured steed, and by this time he had become keenly alive to the horrors of his situation.

Slowly but surely the cords with which his wrists and ankles had been bound were cutting to the bone.

At every bound the horse now made the pain caused the captive was excruciating.

On and on sped the horse!

On and on, as if he were as fresh as ever!

It seemed an age already to Nick since his departure from the Rolling Tavern.

At length his hopefulness forsook him.

He began to feel that the only chance now left him was the chance of speedy destruction.

He noticed that the landscape around him had become hilly and broken, and it seemed probable that some precipice or ravine would soon bring him to a final halt.

His suffering had now become so intense that he looked for this probable termination of his ride with positive impatience.

Suddenly, just as a strange dizziness began to assail him, he heard the bark of a wolf at no great distance.

Other similar sounds succeeded, and ere long a chorus of these cries arose upon his trail, showing that a number of these fiendish creatures were pursuing him.

How he shuddered at those cries.

To be torn by wolves, while still alive, seemed the most terrible doom that could possibly befall him.

Again he struggled with his bonds, but as vainly as before.

They yielded a little, to be sure, but only as much as they had cut into his quivering flesh.

At this moment, just as Nick was resigning himself to instant and certain destruction, a couple of rifle-shots fell upon his hearing.

Then there was a grand tumble of horse and rider, and Nick became insensible.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE RED RANSOMERS.

"THAT was a close call you had last night," were the next sounds of which Nick became conscious.

At these words he looked wildly around.

He was lying in the broad light of day upon a rude couch of brushwood, which had been covered with buffalo-skins.

A rough-looking man was standing over him, leaning upon a rifle.

"A close call, I say," resumed this individual, seeing that Nick had recovered his senses. "Not merely a close call from the wolves, but also from the tumble you had after the horse was killed under you!"

Nick exerted himself to comprehend these observations.

"Who are you?" he asked.

"I'm a prairie kitten, I am, stranger," was the answer; "one of the original stamp-pullers of the Rockies; a tall giraffe of the mountains; a wobbling angel of the solitudes! The more you ask me questions the less you'll really know about me. My looks'll tell you nothing to speak of, and my words are gammon. Call me Dan, pard, and I'll answer to the name jest as readily as if it had been 'stowed upon me by my father and mother.'"

Nick realized that he had fallen into the hands of one of those outlaws who have every reason for concealing their identities, and none whatever for revealing them.

"It matters little who or what you are, Dan," he declared. "You have certainly rendered me a great service and I thank you."

He made an effort to sit up as he uttered these words, but his strength failed him.

"Heavens! what's the matter with me?" he demanded, in startled astonishment.

"So much for playing Mazeppa," answered Dan. "You ought to be thankful for being alive, instead of growling because you're as weak as a baby!"

Nick sunk back upon his rude couch, literally panting for breath.

"Do you expect to resume your travels, jest as if nothing had happened?" pursued the outlaw. "Those ropes have cut your ankles to the bone, and your wrists are as raw as a piece of beef, to say nothing of the gridironing your whole body has received from your head to your heels! We all agreed that such another spectacle had never come under our notice!"

"All of you, Dan? You mean your family?"

"Certainly, my family, and a high old family it is," answered Dan, with an air of merriment.

Nick felt of himself with due care, and then drew a sigh of relief.

"I shall be all right in a day or two," he said.

"Don't you think so?"

"No. You'll have to remain quiet at least a week. By to-morrow, at this hour, you'll be sorer than a boil."

"Then I may as well take a look at my surroundings. Help me to a sitting posture, please, and I'll see where I am."

Dan complied, and Nick bent a long glance around him.

That one look was sufficient.

He saw that he was in a robber-camp.

The site was an open space of fifty acres in the middle of a great forest of pines whose limitations could not be made out.

In the midst of this clearing were a dozen huts and as many tents, all ranged in a neat and uniform manner along two principal streets.

Seated around these huts and tents were sixty or seventy picturesque looking rascals, of different ages and colors, all engaged in cooking their breakfasts.

Nick gave expression to the astonishment the sight caused him.

"I saw nothing of this last night," he said.

"For the good reason that you were three miles from here at the moment I shot your horse under you," returned Dan. "Several of our boys were with me, or we should not have been able to keep the wolves from eating you as well as your horse."

Nick realized how narrowly he had escaped.

"I hope I'm not 'out of of the frying-pan into the fire,' Dan," he declared. "Your people will do me no injury, I suppose?"

"Not the least, if we're satisfied you'll keep our secrets. Ah! the boys have noticed that you have come to! And here comes the cap'n himself to bid you good-morning!"

Nick looked in the direction indicated, and saw a man of singular and striking man approaching.

"Is that your captain?" he asked, as a flush of excitement crept into his pale cheeks.

"Ah! you've seen him!" cried Dan.

He had indeed!

For the man approaching was one of those who at the Rolling Tavern, had been prominent in sending Nick forth upon his wild ride!

As Nick's conscience was perfectly tranquil, the tremor of emotion caused by the captain's approach did not linger.

"Good-morning, Mr. Peddie," greeted the robber chief, extending his hand. "I am glad to see you in a fair way to recover from your horrible ride of last evening, and equally pleased to have a chance of asking your pardon for my share in that business."

"My pardon?" stammered Nick, in amazement.

"Yes, sir—your pardon," repeated the outlaw, wringing Nick's hand heartily. "It was all a mistake on my part. That worthless woman imposed upon me."

"You mean the innkeeper's daughter?"

"Yes, Miss Barter."

Nick smiled contentedly, as he returned the pressure of the hand offered him.

"That young woman deceived me as well as all the rest by her falsehoods," pursued the robber chief. "Her acting was certainly a masterpiece. I was especially bitter against you, as you doubtless noticed. Why? Because I have been paying particular attention to the girl for

several months. I went to the Rolling Tavern last night with my mind fully made up to marry her if she would have me."

"And how have you so soon discovered that her accusations were false?"

"Why, she betrayed herself," exclaimed the robber chief, seating himself near Nick. "No sooner had you been sent adrift upon your horse, and I and the rest had begun to rejoice in the certainty of your destruction, than the guilty woman experienced a fearful shock of remorse. She fell upon her face, tearing her hair and beating her breast, calling herself a murderess, and vowing that she would die with you. I must do her the justice of saying that she supposed herself to be unseen at the moment. She was not aware how near to her my anxieties about her had carried me."

Nick smiled again, as he queried:

"And so she completely unmasked herself?"

"Completely."

"I am glad to hear it. The fact spares me the necessity of saying how entirely you wronged me by your hasty action of last evening—"

"Pardon, once more," interrupted the robber chief, inclining himself with a grace which showed that he had once had a position in good society.

"You are freely forgiven, of course, captain," returned Nick. "I must even add that you are entirely excusable under the circumstances."

"Many thanks for your generosity. Permit us to assist you to a chair at the table, for here comes your breakfast."

A couple of jaunty-looking young men had appeared upon the scene, bearing a table that was handsomely laid, and which was literally loaded with all sorts of tempting dishes—broiled game, coffee, toast, steak, excellent bread, preserves, and various tempting tid-bits which Nick would have never expected to encounter in such a wilderness.

"I invite you to share my breakfast, Mr. Peddie, or I invite myself to share yours—we'll not quarrel about terms," said the robber-chief, when he and Dan had placed Nick in a camp-chair at one side of the table. "It strikes me as a sensible way of making an appeal to you to overlook the wrong of last evening. We can talk as we eat, and eat as we talk, and so get acquainted."

Such genial discourse as this was not to be esteemed lightly, under the circumstances, and Nick responded in cordial terms.

"Permit me to introduce myself to you, Mr. Peddie," pursued the robber-chief, as he passed to Nick a cup of fragrant coffee. "I am Captain Ready, the leader of the Red Ransomers, one of the finest bodies of citizens in the country. In other terms, the sixty or eighty men you see around us are my followers. We live like princes here in the pines at the expense of the public at large—precisely like your members of the Legislature and your senators and congressmen, your millionaires, your monopolists, and all that ilk. We levy contributions on the wagon trains, on the expresses, on the wayside stations, on the stages, on various mining and banking centers—in a word, on everybody traversing our dominions, or residing within them. We even consider ourselves at liberty to take from the red-man anything he may have taken from his white brother. As to gold-dust, bullion, and boxes of treasure, such are our especial reverence. We have been at the business a great many years, and you will not be surprised to hear, therefore, that our secret caves hereabouts are as full of treasure of every description as are the sacred temples of an East-Indian Rajah!"

Nick came near being so interested in these revelations as to neglect the excellent breakfast before him.

"Your frankness pleases me greatly, Captain Ready," returned Nick. "I need scarcely add that I am your guest and a gentleman. How long I must trespass on your bounty remains to be seen, but you need have no more fear of me than of your most devoted follower. However much at variance with your wild life may be my sentiments, I shall never betray anything I may see here or anything you may tell me!"

"That is understood, of course," said Captain Ready, who had waited on Nick with the greatest politeness while speaking. "This ranch I have seen fit to reveal to you, in view of the great wrong I have done you. You'll have to remain with us several days, if the report of our chief medicine-man is correct, and I want you from the start to know just where you are, and to feel that you are perfectly safe among us, and that you are entirely welcome to all we can do for you. All I ask in return for my confidence is substantially what you have already given me—a promise that you will not use to our disadvantage anything you may learn during your involuntary presence among us."

Nick's promise was cheerfully repeated, of course, the outlawry of his hosts not warranting him in being treacherous or ungrateful.

Nevertheless, his situation was anything but pleasant.

He could have wished that fate had played him a trick of a more agreeable description.

A pleasant conversation followed, while ample justice was being done to the breakfast, and by

the time the repast was ended, Nick had conceived a strong interest in his host, and even a sort of respect for him.

He had ventured to hope for a few minutes that his breakfast would so far warm him out of his soreness and weariness as to enable him to resume his journey in the course of the morning.

But the more he felt of his bruised person and investigated his condition, the more clearly did he realize that the Esculapius of the Red Ransomers had made suitable and honest report of his situation.

"I fear I shall have to remain here a day or two, captain," he said, when cigars had been lighted. "I trust I've made my last appearance on any stage as Mazeppa!"

"I join in the wish. Next time you had better be blown up in a steamboat, or dropped two or three hundred feet in the shaft of some mine, by a broken chain. But now a word in regard to your comfort. Just in the edge of the bushes yonder I have as nice a tent as money can produce. I've had it pitched there for a couple of weeks in the hope that Miss Barter would become Mrs. Ready. This is as much as to say, of course, that the interior of the tent is fitted up in the most elegant and comfortable fashion. Allow me to install you in that bower of beauty for the period of your stay among us!"

"With ten thousand thanks, captain, if you are not likely to want the tent for—"

"Oh, she be blessed!" interrupted the outlaw, as his brow darkened. "I'm well cured of my infatuation for her. If I ever risk my life and liberty by another trip to the Rolling Tavern, you can call me the biggest fool on record!"

Here the outlaw made a gesture to his waiting followers, and they at once caught up the chair in which Nick was reclining, and bore him away gently to the tent which had been assigned him.

CHAPTER IX.

A STARTLING DILEMMA.

THE interior of the tent was indeed all the captain had hinted.

An alcove in a palace could not have been more elegant.

The walls were hung with rich silks and satins, and the whole floor was covered by a carpet of the most gorgeous description, while the furniture was magnificence itself.

Some of the carpenters of the band had evidently expended their best efforts upon the richest woods of the Rockies in their attempt to produce chairs and tables and other articles worthy of their leader's admiration.

"You spoke of risking life or liberty in your visits to the Rolling Tavern, captain," observed Nick, when he and Ready were alone. "The remark seems odd to me, in view of your many followers, and has aroused my curiosity. May I ask for an explanation?"

"Certainly, Mr. Peddie. The explanation is, in all frankness, that a company of United States cavalry has been hanging about this neighborhood for several days past, and I've remarked a number of movements which at least suggested that some of these intruders might make an attempt to capture me. If I am not their objective point, one of my prisoners certainly is."

"But you are ready for them?"

"Of course. So far as I am concerned, they could only carry their little point on some such occasion as one of my trips to the Rolling Tavern."

Captain Ready made a few additional remarks, looking to the comfort of his guest, and then added:

"Here are books to read, Mr. Peddie, and even musical instruments, if you should feel an inclination to play upon them. I will come and see you often, and the nearest sentry outside will always answer your call at any moment. Whenever you are well enough to leave, I shall take pleasure in placing at your disposal a pair of our best horses, as a substitute for the one you've lost. Adieu for the moment. I will look for the pleasure of your company at dinner, if I am not able to come to you sooner."

He had scarcely retired from the tent than Nick fell into a profound reflection upon his situation, which was certainly still far from that of a peaceful rancher.

An hour had thus passed and he was in the act of taking a book from a stand of curly maple near the head of his couch, when three men stole almost noiselessly into his presence through the aperture serving as a door, with a stealthiness and secrecy of manner that struck him.

"What do you want?" asked Nick, with the abruptness of a man uncomfortably startled, as he managed by a painful effort to raise himself to a sitting posture.

The answer came quickly from one of the intruders in a mere whisper:

"We want you, sir!"

The appearance of the three men being precisely that of the outlaws swarming in the camp, Nick very naturally supposed them to be followers of Captain Ready.

As their mien, however, was stern and menacing, and especially as they all had drawn revolvers, Nick perceived at a glance that a mystery full of peril was upon him.

Before he could move or speak, the hands of one of the intruders had encircled his throat, and another had seized each of his arms in a vise-like grasp.

"Gag him!" ordered the man who had before spoken, and who was visibly the leader of the intruders. "And be quick about it!"

The struggles of Nick, in the state he was in, were of course simply ridiculous in the eyes of his assailants.

A stick of green wood was forced into his mouth, and secured with cords with such firmness that all his efforts to expel it were fruitless; then he was bound hand and foot as thoroughly as if he had been some ravening beast of prey.

"Away with him," ordered the leader of the three men, as he cut a long slit in the rear of the tent. "Remember! In case we are intercepted by the robbers, we are to leave him dead behind us!"

Nick saw that his adventure already bordered upon tragedy, and took good care not to put any obstructions in the way of his captors.

"From pillar to post, and from bad to worse—such is evidently my fate!" he could not help thinking.

With a few rapid steps the abductors bore him clear of the tent and the camp, and then along a densely-shadowed ravine to one of the grandest clusters of trees in the great forest.

Here four horses were in waiting.

"Mount him," ordered the leader.

Nick was at once placed astride of one of the horses, and his limbs secured by a rope passing under the animal.

The pain this proceeding caused him was excruciating, but he had seen too clearly that his life was at stake to oppose willingly even the resistance of his inertness to the flight of his captors.

"And now to get clear of the neighborhood," added the leader, as he leaped into the saddle, and took the horse assigned Nick by the bridle. "Caution for the moment, but once upon the trail we must ride like Mazeppa!"

Nick could not help groaning dismally as the horses started.

Of all the words in the language, Mazeppa was the one least calculated to amuse him.

What followed during the next half-hour is too painful for description.

To detail at length the tortures of Nick, as his bruised and swollen frame was borne at full gallop through vast forests and over great plains, would be as harassing as fruitless.

Suffice it to say that he was on the very verge of unconsciousness when his abductors at length halted.

"Why, see!" cried the leader, as he dismounted. "The fellow seems gasping for breath! A little water from the brook!"

No time was lost in removing Nick from the horse and in taking the gag from his mouth.

Stretching him upon the ground, the three men chafed his hands and bathed his pallid features, with the air of being startled, as indeed they were.

"Well, he must have been in trouble before we took him in hand," remarked the leader, calling attention to sundry bruises and dislocations that became visible. "He's fresh from a fight, I presume. Perhaps we've been a little rough on him. Why, he's like a dead man!"

"No. He's coming around," replied one of the busy assistants. "He is breathing again naturally. Give him a drop of brandy. There! He'll soon be all right again!"

The attentions of the trio were continued until the color had returned to Nick's cheeks, and until his voice and eyes were again at his disposal.

"Who are you?" was his first question.

"We'll soon show you!"

The leader began removing an extra suit of clothes from his person, and in this proceeding was imitated by his companions.

The uniform of a captain in the United States army was soon visible on the person of the leader, while that of a simple private in the same service became equally prominent on the person of each assistant.

"What! a captain in the United States Army, with a couple of soldiers!" ejaculated Nick, as loudly as his weakness permitted, when the three men had removed the disguise which had enabled them to enter the robber-camp unsuspected.

"Yes, I am Captain Haskell, of the army, at your service," said that personage, "and these are two of my men. Well met, Captain Ready!"

Captain Ready! This greeting told its own story.

These men, then, had mistaken Nick for the robber chief!

The look of astonishment that appeared on Nick's face at the recognition of this mistake can be imagined.

"Oh! of course you'll deny your identity," sneered Captain Haskell complacently, as he marked the expression of Nick's countenance. "When the wolf was in a tight place he would

have been glad to pass for a fox. The thing won't work with us, Captain Ready!"

He placed Nick in a comfortable position with his back against a tree, and resumed:

"There is just one way in which you can return unharmed to your band, Mr. Red Ransomer, and that is to tell us what you have done with Mr. Roger Hamlin!"

"Hamlin?" gasped Nick, looking more and more puzzled.

"Oh! this feigned ignorance will not answer your turn nor ours, Mr. Red Ransomer," assured Captain Haskell sternly. "We know that you captured Mr. Hamlin while he was on his way home from California, and that you have shut him up under threats of eternal captivity if he does not tell you where is the money left by his deceased brother, and also give a large share of his own personal fortune!"

Nick could only stare in bewilderment.

Hamlin—fortune—captivity!"

The words conveyed no meaning to him.

"Yes, Captain Ready," pursued Haskell, this much is known, and if you will restore Mr. Hamlin to us, under proper conditions, and with all necessary precautions, we, in return, will send you back in safety to your band. Freedom for freedom, Mr. Red Ransomer, or else we hand you over to a court-martial, to be tried and shot within twenty-four hours as a robber and assassin! Choose and quickly! In just five minutes I must have your final decision!"

And with this Captain Haskell seated himself upon the fallen trunk of a tree, drew out his watch, and fixed his eyes upon the dial.

"In just five minutes, Mr. Red Ransomer," he repeated sternly. "Life for life, and freedom for freedom!"

He waited for his answer.

CHAPTER X.

ON A BLIND TRAIL.

Nick's answer was hardly of the nature expected.

He simply laughed hysterically.

Between his two terrible riders, his whole body had become as sore as a boil, and his brain was reeling with long pent-up anguish and over-excitement.

About the only hold he still preserved upon his identity was born of the pain that convulsed his whole being.

Then, too, that he should be addressed as Captain Ready, and required to account under pain of death, for the whereabouts of a man of whom he had never heard until that moment, was altogether too much!

He laughed wildly again and again, while Haskell and his two soldiers looked at him as if they thought him delirious.

To tell the truth, he was not far from it.

But Captain Haskell knew his business.

Or at least he thought he did.

"It's of no use, Captain Ready," he hastened to assure his writhing prisoner. "It's the cheapest and commonest sort of gammon for a rogue to deny his identity. But you'll give up the attempt when I remind you where we found you. That tent couldn't be nicer if you were a king! If you're not Captain Ready, how did you happen to be lolling on a silk-covered lounge in Captain Ready's tent? You see that there is no use of trying to carry this fraud further. You were in the captain's tent, and hence you are the captain!"

The prisoner laughed again, carrying his hands convulsively to his aching forehead.

"Your reasoning is good," he replied jeeringly. "If I should find you in a wolf's den, Captain Haskell, you would of course be a wolf."

Haskell was disturbed by this raillery.

Perhaps he despaired of obtaining an avowal from his prisoner.

At any rate, he arose, replacing his watch in his pocket.

"If you are now prepared to listen to reason," spoke Nick, with forced calmness, "allow me to say that I am not Captain Ready."

"We're sure that you are," returned Haskell. "But, suppose we humor your pretension for a moment? If not Captain Ready, who in thunder are you?"

At this prospect of an opening for an understanding, Nick hastened to declaim his real name, character and quality.

"A likely story," was the comment of the military gentleman, with biting sarcasm. "You are Nick Peddie, of Ironton, and are on your way to Dead Man's Ranch? This is all very reasonable, no doubt, if you can once see through it, but be so good as to explain how it happened that we found you in Ready's bed!"

"That's a matter easily explained," replied Nick. "I fell into bad hands at the Rolling Tavern last evening, and was the victim of an adventure which threw me into the midst of the robbers!"

"Indeed!" sneered Haskell. "I presume you'll have no objections to giving us a brief account of that adventure?"

"Certainly not, sir."

And with this, Nick narrated his involuntary personation of Mazeppa, giving the facts as briefly as possible.

"Fortunately we're in a position to verify these statements," declared Haskell, when Nick had concluded. "You say that you must have ridden at least twenty miles in your character of Mazeppa. The first comment I will make on your story is that we are not six miles from the Rolling Tavern at this moment. Your horse must have run in a circle, as the camp of your robber-band is not eight miles from the present site of the Tavern."

"Well, what does all this prove?"

"It proves that I can easily send a messenger to old Barter—that's all," replied Haskell. "I can soon learn from his lips how much truth there is in your story."

"Just the thing! Send to him!"

One of the soldiers was accordingly dispatched on this errand.

"How long will he be gone?" asked Nick.

"About an hour."

"Then I may as well catch a nap," remarked Nick, with a yawn. "It seems as if my head would burst open."

He had scarcely stretched himself at full length upon the dry leaves covering the ground when the fatigues of the previous night sent him off into a profound, if not very peaceful slumber.

Haskell and his man said nothing until their attention was attracted to Nick's deep breathing, and then the latter remarked:

"To be frank with you, cap'n, I have my doubts about his identity. Why not go through his pockets, and look at any letters or other documents we may find upon his person?"

"All right. Do so."

A few minutes were devoted to the task, and then Haskell became singularly disquiet.

But he would not own up until his messenger came back from the Rolling Tavern.

"This man is really what he claims to be, captain," was the soldier's report. "Miss Barter confirms all he has said, and so do the old folks. What's more, the girl has given me a photograph of the real Ready, who, she says 'has been sweet' on her, and here it is."

One look at the picture was enough for Captain Haskell.

"We've blundered, sure enough," he avowed. "Let's leave the man where he is, and get back to camp."

"Where we'll say nothing of this 'feat of arms,' captain?"

"No—unless you want to be slain without benefit of the clergy!"

The captain wrote a few words of excuse, which he attached to the lapel of Nick's coat, in such a way that the youth would be sure to see it as soon as he should open his eyes, and then the three men stole away from the sleeper, soon mounting their horses and riding away at a furious gallop.

They had scarcely vanished when Nick awoke, shivering with cold.

Gathering himself up on his knees, he bent a startled and wondering glance around.

"What! Alone?" he exclaimed. "Have they left me?"

A single living object met his gaze—a horse that was quietly browsing near him.

It was the horse he had last ridden.

It was still saddled and bridled, and had evidently been left for his use.

"I see," muttered Nick, as he gained his feet, painfully and slowly. "They have finished by believing what I told them. Yes, they've left me to myself. I'm free to resume my journey to my famous ranch."

His eye rested upon the slip of paper which had been pinned to his lapel, and he hastened to read it.

"Just so," he growled. "Nearly kill a man, and then say 'excuse me!' If that isn't cheek, what is?"

He moved toward the horse, forgetting in his excitement—for a brief interval—how weak and sore he was.

After several vain attempts to mount, he found himself again in the saddle, and in another moment had laid his course anew for the Dead Man's Ranch, as near as he could calculate its bearings.

He had ridden slowly about a mile, not without considerable pain, when his gaze encountered a pack-horse which was proceeding leisurely in a direction nearly at right-angles with his own.

"That's odd," he muttered.

The situation was all the more odd because he saw nothing of any rider or driver.

"Why shouldn't I follow him?" he thought.

To think was to act.

At the end of a few minutes he was within half a dozen rods of the riderless horse.

He was accordingly near enough to see that the huge leather pouches slung across the back of the strange steed were literally crammed with various commissary stores and supplies.

"He seems to be following a sort of path," said Nick, to himself, looking along the direction the horse was taking. "Here's evidently a mystery! I'll follow the horse, and see whither he leads—taking care not to let him run me into trouble."

The business proved duller than he had expected, as well as more lengthy.

After mile after mile was left behind the quiet

plodder with all the regularity of the ticking of a clock.

There still continued to be a perceptible trail.

At times Nick even noticed other footsteps beneath him than those of the two horses now present—footsteps pointing in both directions.

Gradually the scene around Nick grew wild and rugged, and the route became hilly.

Several narrow passes in as many ravines were slowly passed.

On several occasions the leading horse came to a brief halt, showing that he had been in the habit of carrying such loads upon this route as to necessitate these periods of rest.

Finally, the sagacious creature turned into the bed of a creek in which was considerable water.

Avoiding the deep pools, and taking his way with as much circumspection as a man could have shown, the horse advanced several hundred yards along the creek, which were characterized by banks of jagged rock hundreds of feet high, and at length came to a halt upon a little reach of shelly stone, upon which the hoofs of the animal left no perceptible impress.

Nick regarded him attentively, drawing rein.

"He's evidently at the end of his journey," he muttered. "But, where is his consignee?"

Nick was just as sure the horse was waiting to be relieved of his load as if the fact had been stated in so many words.

In the silence that succeeded, as Nick waited for further developments, a human voice suddenly fell upon his hearing in barely audible tones, proceeding from a point in the face of the cliff within a few rods of him.

Looking in that direction, Nick saw a hand and arm thrust forth from a fissure in the cliff, and waving a piece of white cloth agitatedly as a signal.

What did this mean?

It could only mean that some person in that place was endeavoring to attract the newcomer's attention.

As weak and sore as he was, Nick did not hesitate to respond to the summons.

Securing the two horses so that they could not give him the slip, he began climbing the face of the cliff.

Curiously enough, he found that the task was not so difficult as it had at first appeared.

There were projecting rocks and bushes that came readily to hand, and signs and traces at every step to attest that he was following a route which had often been traversed before.

At the end of a long and severe effort, which left him panting and powerless, he found himself upon a small shelf of rock, just below the hand and arm and signal which had fixed his attention.

CHAPTER XI.

THE REAL ROGER.

"ARE you there?" called a voice freighted with keen anxiety.

Nick gasped assent, quite exhausted.

"Who are you?" pursued the voice. "An honest man or a robber?"

"An honest man," was Nick's answer.

"Thank God! My prayers are heard!"

A nervous rattling of chains succeeded, and then a grim silence.

"You are a prisoner, then?" asked Nick, as soon as he had partially recovered from the exertions it had cost him to reach his present position.

"Yes, a prisoner."

"Whose, may I ask?"

"Captain Ready's!"

Nick comprehended on the instant.

This was doubtless the prisoner Captain Haskell had been so anxious to release.

In other words, Roger Hamlin!

"Can't you climb up to the mouth of the cavern?" came from the voice within.

"I will try."

The effort was duly made, and it was crowned by success.

Nick found himself at the narrow mouth of a cave, into which several large stones had been rolled wedgingly from without, in such a way that even a giant's strength would have been powerless to dislodge them from within.

Between these stones were narrow openings, and it was through one of these openings that the prisoner had thrust his hand and arm.

Peering into this aperture, Nick caught a glimpse of a white face.

"Thank God!" repeated the prisoner, at sight of the youth. "I saw you as you reached the creek, and realized that you are not one of my jailers. I have been chained a hundred feet from here, in the very depths of the cave. But after long effort I have broken my chain, and have advanced so far toward life and liberty. Can you not remove these stones and let me out?"

"I can at least try—as soon as I have rested a little. I, too, have had terrible experiences, and am as weak as a child. What is your name, sir?"

"Roger Hamlin."

The start Nick gave attested to the prisoner that the youth had heard it before.

"Captain Ready is the man who shut me up here," pursued the prisoner. "As you may be

aware, he's the chief of the Red Ransomers—a band of robbers who hold for ransom every wealthy man they can capture."

"Are you alone here?" asked Nick.

"For the moment—yes. My keeper left me early this morning to go to the robber-camp for a fresh supply of provisions. He will soon return."

"His horse is here already," announced Nick, and then, at an ejaculation of terror from the prisoner, he hastened to relate how he had encountered the animal in question, and how he had followed it to its destination.

"I see the hand of heaven in this," said the prisoner, fervently. "The robber may have fallen from his horse in a fit, or some prowling outlaw may have killed him. In any case, a way of escape seems open. See if you can release me!"

Nick set to work as actively as his feeble strength permitted.

A brief examination told him which of the wedging stones came first in the order of removal, and by the exercise of all his strength he was able to turn it out of its pocket!

The others followed in due course, and the opening of the cave was then seen to be large enough for the easy egress of the prisoner.

"Come out, sir," invited Nick. "The way of escape is open!"

"Indeed?" sneered a voice.

Nick turned his head quickly, to find a human face and figure just behind him.

The face and form of Captain Ready!

"I'm glad to see you again, Mr. Peddie," said the robber-chief, with all his previous urbanity, as Mr. Hamlin sunk into an inert mass just within the mouth of the cavern. "Who were the three men who conducted you from our camp?"

"Captain Haskell and two of his men."

"What did they want of you?"

"Why, they mistook me for you!"

At this information Captain Ready laughed long and loudly.

"On learning their mistake," pursued Nick, "they left me in the woods and went about their business. As I was trying to resume my course toward the Dead Man's Ranch, I encountered the pack-horse below, and followed him hither."

"Then you didn't come here with any intention of rescuing Mr. Hamlin?"

"No. I didn't even know of his existence until Haskell asked me what I had done with him, and gave me five minutes in which to confess or die. His object, it seems, was to exchange you for your prisoner!"

"Indeed? He's bolder than I thought. I shall have to cut that fellow's comb before he's much older. You removed these stones, I suppose?"

Nick asserted.

"Under what circumstances?"

Nick frankly stated them.

"What has Mr. Hamlin told you?"

"Only that you demand a large sum of money as the price of his restoration to freedom."

"You would have released him, of course," said Ready smilingly. "I do not blame you. Your point of view is naturally different from mine. No hard feelings shall arise between us on account of this difference. And now a word in regard to the horse you have followed here. The man in charge of it had a fit soon after leaving my camp, and fell to the ground. The horse pursued his course, but the rider returned for a new mount as soon as he had recovered his senses. He will soon be here with a number of men. As to why I have shut Mr. Hamlin up at such a distance from camp, I will only say that this course enables me to confine the secret of his whereabouts to three or four men, and so lessen the chances of treachery. I see you are interested in the gentleman?"

"I am—I confess."

"He could be free any day, if such were his desire," pursued the robber-chief. "He has more money buried within a few miles of the Union Pacific Railway, at the spot where I captured him, than would be required to pay the ransom demanded—money he was taking home from California with him. The train in which he traveled received notice in some way of our intended attack, and Mr. Hamlin was sharp enough to bury his treasure!"

"Then why don't he come to terms?" asked Nick. "Can all the money in the world pay him and his family for what they are enduring?"

"Certainly not. But Mr. Hamlin is very obstinate. Besides, he has managed to send a message to his family by some chance pilgrim, and that message, he says, will call around my ears troops enough to destroy me sooner or later!"

"And this is why he holds out?"

"The very reason. He thinks, too, that he may be able to bribe some of his keepers. He has already had such success in this direction that I have been obliged to change his hiding-place twice. But enough of this, Mr. Peddie. What is your programme?"

"Simply what it has been—to push on to my farm. I can once get clear of all these delays and interferences."

"Good luck go with you, then. I shall count upon your discretion. You'll hear soon of my getting square with Haskell. Those soldiers evidently want a fight with me, and they're in a fair way to have one. There's nothing I can do for you, Mr. Peddie?"

"Nothing, captain—many thanks."

While this conversation had been in progress, the prisoner had been calculating his chances.

He had seen that neither of the speakers were giving him much attention.

He had noted, too, that Ready was directly between the mouth of the cave and the edge of the narrow, rocky shelf on which the two men were standing.

As weak as he was with his long captivity, Roger Hamlin realized that it was within his power to give the robber chief such a sudden thrust as to precipitate him down the face of the cliff.

To merely think of this possibility at such a moment of desperation was to adopt it.

As Nick uttered the words last recorded, the prisoner slipped out of the cave noiselessly and gave Ready a violent thrust, precipitating him into the rocky depths beneath.

The robber's yell of terror was followed by a heavy crash below, and then all was still.

"Good!" cried Nick. "I was considering that very measure. Only I am so weak I was afraid he'd drag me with him. Come, sir!"

Nick led the way down the face of the cliff, keeping his hand upon his revolver, and bestowing frequent glances upon the inert figure at the foot of the rocks.

"Clearly enough, he won't trouble us," observed Hamlin, as they neared the bottom of the dangerous descent. "The bushes have broken his fall, I see, but he's none the less senseless. Let's find the horse he rode hither, secure a few of those supplies from the pack-horse, and escape."

The suggestion was quickly acted upon, and the two men took a hasty departure.

CHAPTER XII.

UNDER A SHADOW.

On one of the rolling prairies not far west of the Missouri, and in the vicinity of a prominent river city, stood a very handsome dwelling.

The sight was commanding, the river above and below, as well as the adjacent country for miles around, being visible from the verandas.

This property belonged to a gentleman named Hamlin—the very Hamlin who had so strangely made the acquaintance of Nick Peddie, and in whom Captain Haskell was taking such a deep interest, as we have just seen.

Mr. Hamlin had past the first twenty years of his business life as a merchant of St. Louis, in which character he had become known to a large circle of friends, by whom he was highly respected.

From the position of a leading merchant to that of a gentleman farmer, the transition is both easy and common.

Becoming tired of the worrying hazards of trade, Mr. Hamlin had purchased a fine estate near the "Father of Waters," and had installed himself and his family upon it, with the intention of passing the remainder of his days in that happy retirement he had always ambitioned.

For years thereafter everything had moved on in the most pleasant fashion.

The family of Mr. Hamlin consisted of his wife and an only daughter.

Mr. Hamlin and his wife simply adored each other, and their daughter was the shrine of their remaining love and tenderness, precisely as they were the exclusive objects of her affection.

But at last had come into this happy household a well-defined shadow.

Mrs. Hamlin had first fallen seriously ill, and then become an invalid.

Not long thereafter Mr. Hamlin had been called to California to settle up the affairs of his only brother—a man of '49—who had died immensely wealthy in San Francisco, and this absence had given a deeper gloom to the situation of the whole family.

It was in vain that Mr. Hamlin had promised to take good care of himself and return as quickly as possible.

Despite all that has been done for the shortening of the trip across the continent, a trip to the Golden State is still no small undertaking, nor one likely to be accomplished without fatigue or drawback.

But more than three months had now elapsed since the departure of the husband and father, and consequently the time originally set for his return was long since past.

His wife and daughter had not merely begun to wonder why he did not come, but had for weeks been decidedly anxious about him.

The path of the traveler by either route cannot be regarded as absolutely free from peril.

Should Mr. Hamlin elect to return *via* Acapulco and Panama, what a long and dangerous route by water!

Should he decide to return Overland, what chances still remain for trouble?

What route had he taken?

Why did he not come?

The autumnal evening was falling gently, but with a chill suggestive of the approach of winter.

The fire which had been lighted in the grate of the roomy parlor of the Hamlin mansion was even more agreeable to contact than to sight.

The curtains had been closely drawn, and the large lamp on the center-table had been lighted.

The whole scene was cosy and bright.

The occupants of the room at the moment were Mrs. Hamlin and her daughter.

The mother was reclining on a lounge which had been drawn up in front of the cheerful blaze of the grate.

She was pale and thin, her features showing at a glance that she had suffered intensely in body and mind.

She was still singularly beautiful, however, retaining in an extraordinary degree the loveliness by which her early womanhood had been distinguished.

The daughter was the image of her mother, only more vivid and glowing.

Rather slight of figure, but as lithe and supple as the fairest of the willows which had given their name to the homestead, she was an incarnation of womanly radiance.

She was pacing softly to and fro, passing near her mother at every turn.

A look of keen anxiety had flashed through the usual serene expression of her countenance.

"It's so strange papa does not come," she ejaculated, giving expression anew to the thought which had become her habitual preoccupation.

"Or that we do not have another letter from him," returned Mrs. Hamlin. "Where can he be all this while? What can he be doing? Why does he not at least write us? If this silence continues, I shall not be able to banish the fear that some horrible calamity has overtaken him."

Alice Hamlin bent over her mother, caressing her tenderly.

"I wish we at least knew by what route to expect him," she murmured. "At the time of writing the last letter received he was uncertain whether he would return Overland or by Panama. It's so strange that we hear nothing further. His later letters have certainly miscarried, or else—"

She hesitated.

She did not dare put into words the dreadful anxieties crowding upon her.

In the silence that succeeded a gentle knock resounded at the rear door of the parlor.

"Come in," called Alice.

A woman of middle age came quietly into the apartment.

She was Mrs. Cook, who had originally entered the family as a nurse of Mrs. Hamlin, but who had long since taken her place as the executive of the household.

She was one of those rare personages who are becoming rarer every year—a household helper who is also a friend.

Mrs. Hamlin and Alice often wondered what they would have done without her.

As quiet as were her ways, she looked keenly after all the affairs of the "Willows," as well out-of-doors as within.

"You look nervous, Amanda," said Mrs. Hamlin, with a kindly smile. "I hope you are not worrying about the escape of that terrible man from jail, and the fear that he may turn up here and murder us before he is recaptured."

"No, Mrs. Hamlin," and the housekeeper stepped nearer, lowering her voice. "But there's a strange man in the kitchen."

Mother and daughter looked startled.

"I do not merely mean a stranger," added Mrs. Cook, "but there's something very singular and puzzling about him. He professes to have just arrived Overland from San Francisco and to bring news of Mr. Hamlin."

At this declaration Alice Hamlin started as if electrified.

Mrs. Hamlin arose to a sitting posture on the lounge, as if about to resume that use of her limbs which had so long been denied her.

"News of father?" exclaimed Alice.

"News of my husband?" cried Mrs. Hamlin, with breathless excitement. "Why do you not bring this man here, Amanda, on the instant?"

"Because I fear there is something wrong about him," replied Mrs. Cook, with a deprecating gesture. "He looks to me as if he might be as hard a man as that escaped prisoner! I was afraid he might be trying to smuggle himself into the house to rob us!"

"Let us be the judge of that, Mrs. Cook," said Alice, with an involuntary smile at the guarded zeal of her dependent. "We can soon tell whether the man is an impostor or not."

"I thought it could do no harm to quarantine him, ma'am," explained the housekeeper, with a shrewd twinkle in her eyes. "I gave him something to eat, as he said he hadn't had a mouthful since morning, and while he ate I questioned him as well as watched him. The man is certainly a villain!"

At this unqualified declaration the mother and daughter exchanged glances of the deepest interest.

"If a villain," commented Alice, "he must

wear his character loosely for you to find him out so quickly!"

She turned to Mrs. Hamlin, and added: "Perhaps it will be as well to adopt Mrs. Cook's line of conduct. Instead of bringing the man at once to the parlor, I will just see him in the kitchen. It will not take me long to accept or reject Mrs. Cook's unfavorable conclusions in regard to him."

She kissed her mother tenderly, and flitted away to the kitchen with the housekeeper.

In five minutes she was back again.

A grave and puzzled look had appeared on her features.

"There is certainly something about the stranger I cannot fathom," she reported. "Without telling you anything that has passed between him and me, I'll let him come into the parlor, and so give you a chance to form an unprejudiced opinion of him."

Mrs. Hamlin assented to the proposition, after a few questions, and the unknown was shown into her presence, flanked by Alice and Mrs. Cook.

At her first view of him Mrs. Hamlin experienced a repugnance akin to terror.

He was indeed a man of chilling and sinister aspect.

"It's singular what trouble one has in doing his neighbors a kindness!" was the first remark of the new-comer, as he bowed politely to Mrs. Hamlin. "I'm half-inclined to be weary with well-doing!"

He seated himself in the chair Mrs. Cook had advanced for his use, and sent a swift and searching glance in every direction around him.

In garb and aspect the unknown was the realization of a returned miner.

His hair and beard were long and unkempt; his clothes patched and tattered; his features gaunt and sunburnt, and his aspect rugged and wayworn.

He was taller than the average man, and there was a massiveness about his chest and shoulders indicative of great strength.

His step was quick and easy, attesting that his muscular powers were not merely remarkable, but in the best condition.

"In the actual state of affairs around us, sir," replied Mrs. Hamlin, with quiet dignity, "you cannot blame a household of helpless women for being careful as to whom they admit into their presence?"

And then, looking the unknown squarely in the face, as if she would read the innermost secrets of his soul, Mrs. Hamlin added:

"Is it true, sir, that you bring me news of my husband?"

CHAPTER XIII.

A STARTLING LETTER.

THE man fumbled a moment in one of his pockets, and then passed to Mrs. Hamlin a folded paper, remarking:

"Let this document speak for me!"

The hand of Mrs. Hamlin trembled like a leaf as she unfolded the paper in question.

Her pallor deepened, and a startled look passed over her features.

"It's your father's handwriting, Alice!" she cried. "Read it! My head swims!"

In an instant Alice was at her side, sustaining her with one hand, while with the other she held for perusal the paper the unknown had presented.

The contents of this missive, which she hastened to read aloud, were as follows:

"IN THE MOUNTAINS, NEAR
"BIG HORN RIVER."

"DEAR WIFE:—I have time to write only a few words. The bearer is an honest and faithful friend, who undertakes to carry this line to you, and tell you my whereabouts and situation. He will tell you all that has happened to me, and you can place implicit reliance on everything he says. This is all I can find a chance to say. ROGER."

The effect of this communication upon the ladies can be imagined.

"You see that I'm vouched for," said the unknown, with a disagreeable smile and mien. "The letter is really in the handwriting of Mr. Hamlin, is it not?"

Alice and her mother hastened to make their excuses.

"That's all right," said the stranger. "I, too, have been cautious. I did not wish to blurt out all I knew without preparing you to hear it."

The ladies bowed in concert.

"It suggests some great trouble," Mrs. Hamlin hastened to add, "but refers us to you for the details."

"Which I am here to give—exactly, madam," responded the stranger. "You shall soon be duly enlightened. I believe my name is not mentioned in the letter, and so I will give it. It's Ben Rodman."

He cleared his throat while Mrs. Hamlin and Alice bowed their thanks for his information, and then continued:

"I am an original '49 man, and have made and lost several fortunes—only to finish, as all such fellows do, at the bottom of the ladder."

"This is all I need say about myself, as you are anxious to hear about Mr. Hamlin."

"It was by mere chance that I joined the train in which he set out for home."

"We naturally became good friends by the way."

"The journey was in every way pleasant and favorable until we reached the mountains near Cresco when the train was suddenly halted and attacked by a great swarm of red-skins under the lead of the famous Roaring Bison—"

The visitor paused, as if overcome by his recollection of his misfortunes.

Alice and her mother exchanged questioning glances.

"I never heard of that chief," said the former.

"Nor I," declared the invalid. "The name is perfectly new to me!"

"It is only too well known in the neighborhood of which I am speaking," declared Ben Rodman with the calm and unmoved voice of a parrot repeating a lesson. "Roaring Bison is the most fiendish of the chiefs who have lately become prominent. Our train was soon plundered of all its valuables, and Mr. Hamlin and I were taken out to be shot in revenge for our desperate resistance."

The mother and daughter could not command their voices to speak.

But Mrs. Cook, who had been watching Rodman closely without allowing him to discover that fact, could not help saying to herself:

"He is indeed a terrible rascal! I'm sure he's lying!"

And yet she could not help thinking of that letter from the absent husband and father.

In any and every case, there was a sinister mystery in the stranger's presence.

What could it be?

She bent nearer to listen.

After a sly and searching glance at the ladies, Rodman cleared his throat again and resumed.

"As good luck would have it, I was not entirely unknown to Roaring Bison. I had rendered him a service when we were both boys, while he was hanging around one of the forts in the Rocky Mountains, and I succeeded in recalling myself to his recollection. He not only spared my life, but granted my prayer for the life of Mr. Hamlin. As soon as the passions of his furious followers had somewhat subsided, he conducted Mr. Hamlin and myself secretly from the camp, gave us good arms and good horses, and wished us a successful and rapid journey!"

The ladies drew a long breath of relief.

"And so you got clear of the Indians?" murmured the daughter.

"Yes—that is to say, of the particular band controlled by Roaring Bison," declared Rodman, continuing to note carefully the effect of his words. "But our situation was by no means free from peril. We were almost a thousand miles from here, in the midst of prowling bands of savages and outlaws. There were only two of us, and one was forced to watch while the other slept. The lameness of our horses, or the dangers in which we were environed, forced us to rest for days together. Again and again did we narrowly miss capture at the hands of the Indians. But all of these drawbacks did not prevent us from making good headway in this direction, and at last—"

"My husband is here?" interrupted Mrs. Hamlin, as she clasped her hands fervently. "You have come to break the news of his safety—of his presence?"

Rodman shook his head.

"The situation is not quite so favorable as that I'm sorry to say," he declared. "No, Mr. Hamlin is not here. I left him at a ranch on the Republican River, about five days to the westward, where he was taken ill with an inflammatory rheumatism which prevented him from traveling. He has sent me ahead, therefore, to say that he is safe, and that he will start anew for home just as soon as he is able to travel."

After all their long and keen anxieties the ladies experienced the greatest relief at these communications.

"Father is in good hands at the ranch in question?" asked Alice.

"Excellent," was the answer. "The rancher and his wife will do all in their power to make him comfortable and hasten his recovery."

Mrs. Hamlin again looked at the address of the letter Rodman had brought.

It was quite full and explicit, pointing out with great precision the location of the home of the Hamlins.

"With these directions, Mr. Rodman, you had no difficulty in finding us, I suppose?" resumed Mrs. Hamlin. "But my husband seems to have been hurried at the time of writing this letter—in a position of such great peril that he did not have time to go into the details. What was the nature of that peril? Please give us all the details."

The messenger reddened suddenly, and moved uneasily in his chair.

But he was quick to recover himself.

"If you will glance at that letter," he explained, "you will comprehend that it was written before our arrival at the ranch where I left him. It was written, in fact, at a moment when he was in hiding from a band of Indians, and when we expected to be discovered from

one moment to another. Afterwards when I took leave of him at the ranch, he was forced to let the communication stand as he had written it, his right hand having become so cramped and swollen as to be quite useless."

"The explanation was ample for the occasion, and the ladies gave themselves up to a sense of positive and permanent relief."

"The ranch in question is not likely to be troubled by Indians?" queried Alice.

"Oh, no. That part of the country has long since been cleared of all hostiles by our troops."

"And the road home is perfectly safe?" demanded Mrs. Hamlin.

Rodman bowed.

"Then we may look for my husband's return from one day to another?"

"Certainly. He will start as soon as he is well enough. Possibly he may have started the very day after I did," answered Rodman glibly. "It's possible, too, that he may still be at the ranch in question. In any case, I am to remain quietly here until his arrival. He has promised to see that my future is a little brighter than my past, in return for the services I have been able to render him!"

"You may count upon the fulfillment of every promise he has given you," declared Mrs. Hamlin, with deep emotion. "We shall none of us forget the benefits you have conferred upon us."

A host of questions were asked by the ladies, to all of which Rodman responded in such a way as to increase their joy, at the same time that their gratitude to him was perceptibly quickened.

A full hour thus passed.

"But I forget, in my selfishness, that you must be worn out with your long journey," at length said Mrs. Hamlin, realizing suddenly the duration of the interview. "Doubtless I have tried your patience in my anxiety to hear everything bearing upon my husband's prolonged absence—"

"Not at all, madam. I could talk all night."

"Nevertheless, we will try to be reasonable," and Mrs. Hamlin smiled brightly. "To-morrow we shall have time to resume the discussion. Meanwhile, Mr. Rodman, I hope you will consider yourself entirely at home here. We shall all be pleased to have you here as an honored guest, while awaiting my husband's arrival."

Mrs. Cook here arose quietly, knowing that it devolved upon her to show the stranger to his chamber. Taking a small lamp from the mantle-piece, she led the way to the apartment in question.

"I hope it's an outer room, Mrs. Cook," remarked the guest, as he entered the room. "I can never sleep unless I can open a window to the prairie."

"Well, you have just your preference here," returned the housekeeper, with a nervousness which showed that she was not yet fully satisfied in regard to the stranger and his communications. "This window, as you see, sir, opens upon the garden."

She opened the window in question, inviting the strange guest by a gesture to take a view from it.

He hastened to do so.

"Charming! charming!" he ejaculated. "You may leave the window just as it is. There will not be a bit too much air. As an old plainsman, I can never sleep unless the fresh air is blowing on me."

"Where's your horse, sir?" asked Mrs. Cook, as she retired from the window.

"I left him at the stable in the village."

"Wouldn't you like our groom to bring him here? or one of our farm-hands?"

Ben Rodman smiled, understanding only too well the motives underlying this question—a desire to hint to him that there were "men-folks" on the premises.

"Thank you—no," he answered carelessly. "It's a matter of no consequence. I will not trouble you."

"You ate very little supper, sir. Shall I not bring you up a lunch?"

"Oh, no—many thanks."

The housekeeper lingered a few moments, removing the counterpane and at the same time trying to surprise some unguarded gleam in the eyes of Rodman, but all excuse for lingering was soon over, and she bade the mysterious guest good-night and withdrew abruptly.

"A regular old cat," was the comment of Rodman, as he dropped into a chair and looked after her. "She's evidently the 'man of the house!' I shall have to be on my guard against her. She has really looked me out of countenance two or three times already."

He listened intently, looking around upon the pictures adorning the walls and upon the furniture with a thoughtful and critical air.

"A nice place," he muttered. "The family is evidently wealthy. A fine nest this in which to quarter one's self. I wish I had a home here for life. I'd really be tempted to become honest!"

With another sharp glance around him, he gently locked the door by which he had entered, and then placed a small table in front of the open window, setting the lighted lamp upon it. After a searching survey of a wardrobe off the

room, he seated himself beside the table, lighted a cigar, and began smoking with a thoughtful and scheming air of the most sinister description.

"So far the thing's a success," he assured himself as a spiral of smoke curled leisurely out of the window from his lips. "I'm duly installed, and in quarters fit for a nabob. The two old girls evidently believe all I have told them."

CHAPTER XIV.

RODMAN'S PARD.

A STRANGE chirping sound, as of some unfamiliar bird, suddenly arose from the midst of the dense evergreens by which the lawn under the window was dotted.

Rodman started to his feet, his dark features lighting up in a very joyful fashion.

"Ah! there's Dirker!" he muttered.

Seizing the lamp, he waved it around his head, and then moved it up and down with a rapid motion, finally replacing it on the table.

At these proceedings, which evidently conveyed some well-defined information, the strange cry was repeated in a modified form, proceeding from a point considerably nearer than before.

Leaning upon the window-sill, Rodman peered down into the darkness.

His room being on the second floor, and the darkness not too intense, he was able to see distinctly the outlines of a man who was standing immediately beneath the window.

"It's me, old boy," called this man in a shrill whisper. "Lower your ladder."

Producing a stout and compact rope-ladder from an inner pocket, Rodman secured one end of it to a leg of the bedstead which had been placed at his disposal, and lowered the other end to the new-comer.

"Come up," then enjoined Rodman, "if you are certain no one will see you."

The new-comer hastened to act upon this invitation.

The rope-ladder having regular loops at easy distances, it was not difficult for the new-comer, with very little noise, and hardly a perceptible swaying from side to side, to raise himself, hand over hand, to the level of the open window.

"Have no fear, old boy," assured the agile climber, as he noticed a look of anxiety upon the face turned toward him. "No one will see me. This side of the premises is as deserted as a graveyard."

He slipped into the chamber nimbly while speaking, and Rodman hastened to lower the curtains and remove the table and lamp to the opposite side of the apartment.

"Sit down, Dirk," he invited. "I have the best of news for you."

Dirker sat down with a shiver.

"I thought I should shake myself out of my boots while awaiting your signal," he declared, speaking in a mere whisper, as he had done before. "It's really too late in the season for a man to be standing and doing nothing, especially if his whisky bottle is empty."

The eyes of the new-comer roved about the room a few moments, in the same inquisitive manner Rodman had exhibited.

"There's no mistake, then?" he resumed.

"You've struck a gold-mine?"

"Or something very like it—without the least doubt."

"That agrees with all I heard at the village," said Dirker. "It's thought that the estate of the brother who died in California footed up to several millions. But what sort of a cock-and-bull story did you hit upon to gain admittance into this charming retreat?"

"Oh, the one we settled upon, with a few necessary variations. Allow me to repeat it exactly."

Rodman hastened to report the interview he had just had with the ladies, and was more than once interrupted by the irrepressible chuckles of his companion.

"Pretty well done," was the comment of Dirker. "A good beginning. What a pity it is that we haven't the least idea where Mr. Hamlin is or what has happened to him!"

"Yes, a tremendous pity! My private belief is he's deadlier than a door-nail! The man from whose body we stole this letter was certainly killed by the Indians, and it's not too much to say that Mr. Hamlin has had a similar streak of bad luck somewhere on the Divide!"

Little need to comment on these confidences. The couple really knew nothing about the whereabouts of the missing husband and father or about his situation!

"Our wait here is likely to be a long one, you think?" continued Dirker.

"Yes—all winter. But in a day or two I'll contrive to bring you to anchor here, under one pretense or another, and it will be curious if our lively imaginations do not supply us with the ways and means of making a good living out of this old woman and her daughter for a long time to come."

"But suppose Mr. Hamlin should really turn up, old fellow?" suggested Dirker.

"Well, we're likely to hear of his approach as soon as any one, and with a good horse at command we can ride away at our leisure as soon as the house gets too hot for us."

"To be sure! We can vanish when we find that our room is likely to be more agreeable than our company. Let's drink to our success. I've brought along a full bottle from the village for that very purpose."

"All right," returned Rodman. "Have a smoke while we are talking. I want you to be quite at your ease, so as to comprehend all I say, and realize just where we stand."

A cosy scene of enjoyment was that the two men soon exhibited, as they drank and smoked, conversing feelingly of Mr. Hamlin and his family.

Verily, Mrs. Cook had not been mistaken in her reading of Rodman's countenance.

He was indeed a "terrible villain!"

And all this time in what a false sense of security and hope had the fears and anxieties of Mrs. Hamlin been hushed! What would have been her horror and wonder if she had been told that the man she had taken under her roof really knew nothing of her husband's fate and fortunes!

He and Dirker had found the letter of Mr. Hamlin on the dead body of the man who had undertaken to convey it to Mrs. Hamlin, and that was all they knew about it.

For a long time after the withdrawal of Ben Rodman from their presence, Mrs. Hamlin and Alice remained silent.

"The letter is certainly papa's," at length said the daughter, with a mien which showed that sundry doubts had been suggested to her. "So far we are on solid ground."

"Yes, and it was written in a moment of great peril—this much is certain," returned Mrs. Hamlin. "I am not entirely satisfied with the appearance and communications of Mr. Rodman, but there is certainly a basis of fact under all he has told us."

"It's easy enough to verify what he says, mother," pursued Alice, as a look of quiet resolution beamed from her eyes. "Papa is not so far away, if we may believe this man, as to prevent me from going to his relief!"

The mother held her breath in amazement.

"You, my child?" she murmured.

"Why not? Mrs. Cook can take good care of you in my absence!"

"True, she could. So far as I am concerned, therefore—"

"And as to the rest," resumed Alice, with thoughtful energy, "her sister and her sister's husband would afford me ample companionship and protection."

"But the danger—the Indians?"

"The Indians are pretty much cleaned out on the Republican River, and the settlers are numerous throughout its valley."

"But there are plenty of white outlaws that are even worse than red-skins," suggested Mrs. Hamlin.

"I agree with you, dear mother, but you must remember that the Government has scattered a great many troops along the principal routes and upon the border."

"But there are plenty of outlaws, white and red, that the troops have never been able to lay their hands upon! Think of those terrible Red Ransomers who have so long been the scourge of the Rockies. What a horrible experience it would be if you were to fall into the hands of such men!"

"I am aware, of course, that there is positive danger in such a journey as I have proposed," avowed Alice with great firmness. "But I think that with Mr. and Mrs. Dayton, and such help as we could obtain from honest ranchmen and at the military posts, we could make our way to the place where papa is staying without any great peril. As to the fatigue of such a trip, it is hardly worth a mention. You know how strong I am, how careful I am, and how cautious I would be, and how resolute in every emergency."

Mrs. Hamlin reflected earnestly.

"Let us see what Mrs. Cook thinks of your project," she proposed. "Here she comes."

The case was stated to the housekeeper as soon as she entered the apartment, and at every word her face lengthened.

"I wouldn't trust a dog with this Mr. Rodman," she declared stoutly. "There's something about that man we haven't fathomed!"

"But what?" asked Alice.

"That remains to be seen. I propose to keep an eye upon him."

"Of course that's the least we can do," remarked Mrs. Hamlin. "But let us now discuss all the aspects of the situation. I am sure none of us are sleepy!"

"Sleepy!" echoed Mrs. Cook. "I shall not be able to close my eyes while that man's in the house."

The discussion proposed by Mrs. Hamlin was duly entered upon, and lasted until a late hour of the night.

It is unnecessary to narrate its details.

Suffice it to say that a great surprise awaited Ben Rodman, when he presented himself, after a good night's sleep, to the family in which he had gained a footing under such false pretenses.

CHAPTER. XV.

THE SPIDER AND THE FLY.

"I HOPE you slept well, sir," was the greeting of Alice Hamlin.

"Very well indeed, miss."

"I trust you are rested, Mr. Rodman," said Mrs. Hamlin. "My daughter and I will soon have occasion for your best services."

"The more useful I can be the better," answered the impostor, with a wary glance around.

"You—you have no news of Mr. Hamlin?"

"Nothing later than the news you brought us," avowed Mrs. Hamlin. "Please be seated. Breakfast will soon be ready. Meanwhile, I may as well tell you the resolution my daughter and I have formed over night. Mr. Hamlin is likely to have a very serious time with his inflammatory rheumatism. The disease has been hereditary in his family from time immemorial."

"I think he told me as much," declared Rodman, dropping uneasily into the nearest chair.

"Yes, this attack is a serious thing for my husband," pursued Mrs. Hamlin. "He ought to have the best of care. There's no telling when he'll be able to travel. He may be helpless for months in the out-of-the-way place where you've left him. In view of all these facts, my daughter has resolved to go immediately to her father's assistance!"

"To go—"

For nearly a moment the startled plotter sat as if dumfounded, and then he ejaculated:

"Impossible!"

"And why impossible?" asked Alice.

"Think of exposing a young girl—a mere child, as I may say—to the thousand dreadful dangers of such an expedition! It would be sheer madness! Think of those Red Ransomers and other outlaws—"

"But we are not going within hundreds of miles of the Red Ransomers," protested Alice, scanning the impostor closely. "What is there to fear in a journey of a few days in the Republican Valley?"

"Everything—everything!" assured Rodman. "Believe me, Mrs. Hamlin, if you allow your daughter to set out upon this foolhardy expedition, you'll never see her again—never! She will meet a horrible fate!"

"But she is going well protected, sir, and in good company—"

"That makes no difference!" protested Rodman, earnestly. "What is an escort of two or three men, or even half a dozen with such bands of outlaws as are to be found everywhere on the border? I speak as an old plainsman, as well as in the capacity of a friend and well-wisher."

"I'm not easily scared, sir," Alice contented herself with replying. "You'll have to give me facts and figures, if you seek to change my purpose!"

"I am not easily alarmed on my daughter's account, Mr. Rodman," observed Mrs. Hamlin, quietly. "I have consulted with friends during the night, and have arranged to have due protection from the forts and otherwise. Since my daughter believes she can make this journey in safety, I approve of her setting out upon it. Of course every precaution will be taken, and she will travel well attended."

Mr. Rodman did not propose to be dispossessed so easily of the cosy winter quarters of which he had taken possession.

He continued his protests against the expedition, advancing many a good reason, but many more poor ones.

He said so much, in fact, that he deepened the suspicions of which he had become the object, and confirmed Alice so completely in her project that nothing could have turned her from it.

For more than an hour—during breakfast and afterward—Rodman tried to change the purpose of the mother and daughter, but he was at length compelled to realize that his objections had merely strengthened their resolutions.

The frame of mind in which he walked to town, at the end of the long interview, can be easier imagined than described.

"We're in a pretty pickle, Dirker," he said to that ruffian, on meeting him at the place appointed at their separation on the preceding evening. "That girl has made up her mind to go to her father's assistance."

Dirker uttered a prolonged whistle.

"And we don't even know where he is!" he muttered, "or whether he is still in the land of the living."

"Singularity enough," pursued Rodman, "that inflammatory rheumatism I invented for him turns out to be hereditary in the family, and it is feared that he'll lie there helpless all winter—at the imaginary ranch where we've left him. Could anything be more awkward than for us to get tripped up in this fashion at the very commencement of our romances! Come, Dirker, as you assisted me in planting all these lies, it'll be mighty queer if you can't help me cultivate them to a harvest. Can't you tell me how to save our bacon?"

"I'm blessed if I can!" replied Dirker, shaking his head slowly. "We shall have to assent to the journey. You must, of course, introduce me as a trusty friend, and I will go with you."

"But how are we to get over the fact that

there is no ranch in the case, no father, no anything?" asked Rodman.

"Nothing is easier. All we have to do in such a journey is to march from lie to lie, precisely as one would march from mile-post to mile-post."

"Very well, Dirker. If we must, we must. But it's hard to pull up so suddenly, after all the dreams I've had of passing the winter here and living on the fat of the land. You shall go with us, of course, but I can't introduce you under that horrible name of Dirker! What a pity it is that you stuck a knife into that miner, or that you didn't do it more secretly! The name'll cling to you forever."

"No, nor a minute longer!" returned its owner. "I'll take a new name—something clean and stylish. You may call me Potter. Potter is good. With my great capacities for lying, that young lady and her mother will doubtless be as clay in my hands."

"All right, Mr. Potter! Suppose you walk over to our future estate with me, and I will introduce you to the ladies."

"That'll suit me exactly."

They walked away together.

"I like the idea of this trip the more I think of it," observed Potter, as we may as well call him. "Fact is, if the girl should be unable to find her father at the ranch, we can always find her at any minute she may be wanted! Those Red Ransomers give me an idea. I dare say all our interests lie in this direction. Upon the very face of things, it would seem desirable to separate the mother and daughter, and dig a pit between them which only gold can bridge? Do you take, old fellow? By playing this card properly, we can strike the old lady for twenty or thirty thousand before Christmas!"

"I'm glad you're so wide awake!" declared Rodman. "Permit me to mention a little idea that has crept into my noddle. From all we have learned since our arrival in the neighborhood, Miss Alice Hamlin has no avowed suitor. Now, I'm not a beauty, but if I simulate a few good deeds, and display a little heroic devotion, I may become positively handsome to the romantic Miss Alice! Suppose I lay myself out for her capture?"

"That's the very thing to do, Ben! Should you succeed in planting yourself, I can become your factotum at a handsome salary. Let the dear creature have her way. If she is so anxious to brave the perils of the plains, let's brave them with her. We can invent lots of exciting situations to show off our devotion and make ourselves useful. We can invent Red Ransomers, red-skins, and what not! We can save her from robbers—from anything she fears, in fact! The journey will be as interesting as a play—especially if we should really stumble upon the father and effect his rescue, which is by no means a far-fetched possibility."

"Bravo! let's be off this very afternoon!" proposed Rodman. "A few hours will suffice for every necessary preparation."

The event verified this prevision.

The pretended zeal of Potter in their service rendered him acceptable to the ladies, and he had no difficulty in persuading them that the proposed expedition for the relief of the absent husband and father was a wise and timely measure.

"We shall meet Mr. Hamlin before we have been three days on the road," was the final assurance of the conscienceless schemer. "But his return home will be all the more pleasant and rapid for our presence."

It was still early in the afternoon when the little expedition took its departure, and long before night it had reached the solitudes of the great prairies.

"We've taken a big step in the right direction, old boy," whispered Potter to his confederate. "The three members of the family are now in three different places, and we'll take good care that at least two of them do not get together again until we are well paid for our arduous labors."

Ben Rodman laughed noiselessly, averting his gaze from Alice Hamlin.

It would be no easy matter to record all the rascally hopes and designs which were pushing him at that moment in the direction he was going!

CHAPTER XVI.

ALMOST DISCOURAGED.

A WEEK had passed since Alice Hamlin commenced her perilous journey over the great plains of Kansas and Nebraska.

It had been a week of constant fatigue and anxiety, and of perfectly useless inquiries and explorations.

The travelers were still pushing slowly to the westward, ascending one of the branches of the Republican River.

The two conspirators, as was perfectly natural, were taking the lead.

Behind them rode Alice and Mrs. Dayton.

In the rear was Mr. Dayton, followed by a couple of young men leading as many pack-horses.

The whole number of persons in the little

caravan was seven, and they had two or three extra horses for use in case of any sudden contingency.

Thus far no actual disaster had overtaken the travelers, although, as already indicated, they had experienced a number of scares, some of which were of a decidedly thrilling description.

An air of gloom and preoccupation rested upon the features of the entire party.

"Seems to me that we've about reached the end of our rope, old boy, unless we invent something fresh and original," said Rodman to his confederate. "It's high time for us to reach the ranch where we left Mr. Hamlin. We can't continue to pull the wool over the eyes of Miss Alice, unless we make our lies a little more robust."

"I'd no idea her courage'd hold out so long," returned Potter, with a sigh. "What daring she has! What energy! I agree with you, however, that she has fed upon bear about as long as even her sanguine nature can stand it!"

The face of Mr. Dayton, as the responsible chief of the expedition, was even more clouded than those of the two weary plotters.

He was a man in the prime of life, hard-handed and honest-hearted, who had passed a number of years on the plains, and who had consequently been regarding his guide for several days with wonder and suspicion.

"I'm sure we ought to have reached the ranch in question before now," Alice was saying to Mrs. Dayton. "Can it be that these men are deceiving us? Can it be that we are wandering at random over the prairies?"

"Heaven only knows," replied Mrs. Dayton, who was a motherly, sensible woman of about forty years. "They certainly seem to have a great deal of private consultation with each other, and their countenances, it must be confessed, are not passports of the best description. But did they not say at noon that we should undoubtedly be at the ranch in question in the course of the evening?"

"Yes, they did, or I could have hardly kept up my courage," replied Alice. "Perhaps I am too suspicious, but I fancied there was something hollow and false in the assurances of Mr. Rodman. He is probably unscrupulous enough to say almost anything to keep me quiet."

"Well, we can at least wait to see what the evening will bring us," said Mrs. Dayton thoughtfully. "At the worst, we can turn our faces in the other direction, with or without the knowledge of these men and go home."

"True, unless Rodman should turn out to be a thorough villain, and to have a gang of outlaws at his service. He may be one of the Red Ransomers for all we know to the contrary. As you have doubtless noticed he has been hanging around me disagreeably ever since we set out upon this journey. What is the man aiming at? Does he really expect me to be satisfied forever with these slim results?"

"He's certainly acting in a very queer manner," said Mrs. Dayton. "But let us hope that another day will throw new light upon the situation."

The afternoon wore slowly away.

It was near night when Rodman and his confederate, riding a short distance in advance, caught sight of a ruined stone house at no great distance ahead of them.

"There's a house we stopped at over night, old boy, when we were on our way eastward," observed Rodman. "Do you remember the name of the occupant?"

"No. He's evidently had a streak of bad luck. Perhaps the red-skins have scooped him!"

"I think not. We've hardly seen enough of the red-skins to warrant such a conclusion. Still—"

"Still they *might* have been here," suggested Potter. "An idea strikes me. How would it do—since we must do something—to make this ruin the ranch at which we left Mr. Hamlin? Poor man! The Indians have made an unexpected descent upon the place and have killed him!"

"No, that won't do—the killing business, I mean," returned Rodman quickly. "Perhaps the leader of the Indians was my old friend, Roaring Bison? In that case, Mr. Hamlin has been carried off to the camp of the Bison to recover from his rheumatism."

"Or to make more business for us—ha, ha!" laughed Potter. "In any case, yonder ruin is all that remains of the house at which you left Mr. Hamlin. Isn't that so?"

"I can swear to the fact—the very house! Evidently a band of red-skins has made a raid in his direction, and burned the house to the ground, capturing or murdering its occupants—men, women, and children. As we don't wish to be too hard upon Miss Alice, let's allow that the old man wasn't killed, but has either made his escape, fallen into the friendly hands of Roaring Bison, or has been carried off by some similar red-skin!"

"The very thing," commented Potter. "Leave me to put in the fancy touches and the blood-curdling embellishments. First, this is the spot where we left the interesting rheumatic. Second, the man's gone. Third, we must look for him elsewhere. Fourth, we can keep looking.

Thus, as a grand total, you see that we have plenty of business for the approaching winter."

"Yes, and we'll 'make hay while the sun shines,' I'm thinking," said Rodman, with a side-long glance at Alice. "I have not yet plucked up courage enough to present myself as a suitor, but a good round of woe and misery will open the road to that line of conduct, if some chance discovery concerning the father does not open a better one. Be sure to confirm every lie I tell, as heretofore, and we shall come out triumphant."

Drawing rein suddenly, Rodman raised himself in his stirrups and bent a long and earnest gaze upon the shapeless mass of ruins which had now loomed up distinctly to his right.

"As true's I live, Miss Hamlin," he cried, with well simulated agitation, "that is the very house in which I left your father! The red-skins have burned it!"

All was at once excitement and apprehension in the little caravan, of course.

"Be cautious now," resumed Rodman. "Mr. Potter and I will ride forward to reconnoiter, while you come on more slowly. Look sharp for Indians!"

The couple rode forward at a smart pace, and had soon taken such an advance that their gibes and sneers were in no danger of being overheard by the victims of their misfortunes.

A sufficient examination was given to the premises for the two ruffians to feel sure that no one was lingering in the neighborhood, and then they rode quietly back to Alice.

"It's the work of the red-skins, as I saw at a glance," reported Rodman, "but the usual signs of murder are lacking. I dare say the occupants had time to make their escape!"

The soul of Alice Hamlin was too full for utterance.

She scarcely took her eyes from the unsightly ruins until she was close beside them.

By this time the first gray shadows of evening were falling.

"This is awkward enough," said Rodman, addressing himself particularly to Alice. "We're not only defeated in the one great object of the expedition, but we're without shelter. I had counted upon a good night's rest here for all of us, and especially for the horses."

"Well, the horses at least can be made comfortable," returned Alice, mastering her emotions by a resolute effort. "There is no other house hereabouts, Mr. Rodman?"

"Not within ten miles, and that is an old Government station."

"It's out of the question, then," said Alice with a sigh. "We must stay here till morning. Let the horses be unsaddled. I'll have Mr. Dayton pitch my tent in this little hollow back of the house."

The little cavalcade was soon encamped for the night, and due attention was given to the wants of all its members, including the horses. It was a sad and gloomy hour for Alice.

Her soul was torn by a thousand conflicting emotions.

Had her father been killed by the red-skins, or had he made his escape?

"In the latter case he would have set out for home, if able to do so," she whispered to Mrs. Dayton. "He may be at home at this very moment, and I hundreds of miles from him! Or he may have wandered forth into the wide prairie, where, sick and helpless, he has died of starvation, or been killed by wolves!"

These reflections were too terrible to be endured in inaction.

Arising, and declining the food Mrs. Dayton was pressing upon her, she sauntered to the top of the crest of one of the rolling ridges by which the camp was bounded.

CHAPTER XVII.

A NEW VIEW OF THINGS.

"Hist!" enjoined a voice abruptly. "Don't be afraid, miss! I'm a friend!"

In the mood which had come over her, Alice was more interested than alarmed, as she turned toward the speaker.

"I'm the man who lately lived in this house," pursued the voice, as a man of middle age suddenly presented himself to her view, under cover of a group of bushes, and within a few yards of her. "My name is Britton."

"Britton! Mr. Rodman told me your name was Houseman!"

This was indeed the name Rodman had repeatedly given as that of the rancher to whose care he had left Mr. Hamlin!

"There's some mistake, I reckon," assured the new-comer. "My name is really Britton."

"And you owned and occupied this house before it was burned?"

"I did—and own it still."

"Who burned it? The Indians?"

"No, miss. It took fire accidentally."

Alice gasped for breath.

"And—and no one was injured by the fire?" she murmured. "No one was burned, I mean?"

"Certainly not. I even had time to save most of my furniture and other effects."

"One question more, then. Where is Mr. Hamlin?"

The new-comer repeated the name in simple amazement.

As one who repeats a name which is perfectly new to him!

"Speak! Where is he?" demanded Alice, excitedly. "Has he left for home?"

"Excuse me, miss," returned Britton, "but I see that you are laboring under some mistake. There has been no Mr. Hamlin here. Who do you mean, anyhow?"

"I mean my father. I am Alice Hamlin. Mr. Rodman told me my father was left here in your care ten or twelve days since."

"All a mistake, or worse, I assure you," interrupted the rancher. "But who is your Mr. Rodman? That short man who rode by himself as you approached?"

"No, that is Mr. Dayton. Mr. Rodman is the man that rode up first to the house."

"And so you call that chap Rodman, do you?" asked Britton, with a curious smile.

"That's what he told me his name was," protested Alice, with what gathering excitement will be readily imagined.

"Well, he lied, then. His real name is Gilman, and the fellow with him is named Brower. They are both runaway cavalry soldiers, and staid here one night about ten days ago, when they informed me that they were going to the Missouri to seek their fortunes. They are two of the meanest liars, not to say two of the most miserable wretches, to be found on the plains. Ah! there they are now," he added, as a flame arose in the bottom of the hollow, lighting up the figures of a couple of men standing beside it. "That man on the right is Gilman—"

"He calls himself Rodman."

"And the other is Brower—"

"He calls himself Potter!"

"Well, his real name is Brower. He is usually called Dirker, on account of having dirked a miner."

"But are you sure of their identities, Mr. Britton?"

"As sure as I am that my own name is not Houseman," answered the rancher, smilingly. "The fact is, I am fresh from the cavalry service myself, and know these fellows as well as you know your own mother. But I see that you are the victim of some flagrant imposture. Please enlighten me as to its nature, that I may be able to render you assistance."

Alice hastened to comply with the suggestion, but she had not said a dozen words about her father before Mr. Britton interrupted her.

"You're all at sea, miss," he assured. "Your father is not in the hands of Roaring Bison, for the very good reason that there is no Roaring Bison! Mr. Hamlin is in the hands of the Red Ransomers, the chief of whom calls himself Captain Haskell. I have these facts from Captain Haskell, my old commander, who has recently sent me handbills respecting these deserters, and who has written me in a friendly way about all that's going on around him since I left the service."

Alice sat a few moments in speechless wonderment.

How strangely events were turning!

"And where is this Captain Ready?" she asked.

"Way up at the foot of the Rockies, several hundred miles to the westward. Captain Haskell is in that same neighborhood, and writes me that he is watching for a chance to rescue Mr. Hamlin from the robbers."

Alice gasped for breath again.

How mercifully the very lies of Rodman had been overruled for good!

She had really got track of her father by following the lead of that perfidious villain, who really knew nothing about him!

A moment she struggled with her joyous excitement and relief, and then she resumed:

"But these men had a letter in father's handwriting, Mr. Britton—a letter that we really believe to be authentic!"

She hastened to produce it and so set forth its purport.

Britton smiled again.

"The cunning dogs stole it from its original bearer, or became possessed of it in some other improper manner," he declared. "In any case, you are the victim of an infamous and heartless swindle—a most cruel and wicked imposture. These two fugitive cavalymen can do nothing toward rescuing your father, and have no intention of rendering you any such service. They are far more likely to get you into some terrible trouble than to help you. Are those other three men with you to be trusted?"

"Perfectly."

"Then you must get away from here very early in the morning, giving these two lying miscreants the slip. I'll take good care that they do not discover the route you have taken. To be frank with you, there is a company of soldiers not far distant, and I'll have these two men arrested not far from midnight, and carried hence to take their trial as deserters. As to your own course, Miss Hamlin, you must be the judge. If you wish to push on toward the land of the Red Ransomers, I shall be glad to give you my escort and best services. But hush! Here comes your Mr. Rodman! Don't mention that you have seen me!"

And with this Mr. Britton vanished.

The emotions with which Alice awaited the approach of the impostor can be imagined.

The interview between Alice and Rodman was quite unsatisfactory to the latter.

He couldn't quite understand the sarcastic utterances of the young lady, nor her undisguised incredulity in regard to several of his most plausible falsehoods, or the reserve with which she saw fit to invest her views and opinions, and especially her plans for the morrow.

"Something's up," was the sententious remark of the ruffian, as he returned to his confederate. "That girl'll make us trouble. She thinks we're liars, if not villains!"

"Let her think what she pleases," muttered Potter, as he lighted a cigar. "Are we not alone on the prairie? Do you care the snap of a finger for that girl's anger or reproaches? At the first offensive word from her, just let her know that you are master."

"But her good friend Dayton?"

Potter looked around stealthily.

Mr. Dayton was engaged, near the ruins of the house, in pitching the little tent in which Alice and Mrs. Dayton had passed almost every night since leaving home.

"We'll tumble him into a hole without ceremony, if he makes us any trouble," answered Potter. "But don't forget that fair means are better than foul. I think we can feed the young lady on promises a few days longer. Be that as it may, let's get a good night's rest in the shelter afforded us. There's no necessity of a watch, as I see."

"No. We shall not be troubled. Let's have a good supper, and then a sleep that will fix us all right for any possible squabbles and cares of to-morrow."

The evening passed away in the usual manner, Alice retiring to her tent with Mrs. Dayton, and Mr. Dayton and the two young men making themselves comfortable under an improvised shed at no great distance.

As to the two plotters, they made so free with sundry stores provided for the journey, that they were in a profound slumber long before any one else in the camp had thought of retiring for the night.

The reader will not be surprised to hear, after what we have seen of Mr. Britton, that this sleep was destined to be detrimental to the schemes of the pair.

In fact, they had scarcely "turned in" in the retired nook selected, with plenty of prairie grass under them, and good blankets over them, when Britton appeared cautiously and silently on the scene, and took a good look at them.

"There you are, my fine fellows," was his mental comment. "It's time to ring down the curtain and put up the bars."

He waited grimly until the breathing of the two men attested that they were soundly locked in slumber, and then he uncovered a dark lantern he carried, allowing a bright gleam of light to shoot out upon the prairie to a great distance.

Not long afterward, a number of men, in the uniform of cavalry soldiers, arose in the tall grass immediately in front of the light.

The eager face of the leader of the new-comers—a lieutenant—was thrust close to that of Britton.

"It's all right, lieutenant," said the latter. "Just listen a moment, and you'll hear your men snoring. They are close behind me. I trust you'll make very sure of them. Don't let them escape, either before they are court-martialed or afterward. It would be very awkward if they should make Miss Hamlin any more trouble."

"Let me once get hold of them," responded the lieutenant, "and you may hold me responsible for all the mischief the rascals can do for many a long month to come."

"Enough! Seize them."

The astonishment of the two ruffians on being rudely awakened and secured was too great for expression.

They could only glare at their captors in mute astonishment.

"Your little game is up, my two enterprising runaways," assured the officer. "Miss Hamlin has been duly enlightened, and knows all about you. She has been told that you are a couple of runaway cavalymen named Gilman and Brower, and that you have no knowledge whatever of the whereabouts of Mr. Hamlin. As to the old acquaintance who has done you this good turn, he desires to present his compliments."

The couple did not need to ask the name of the old acquaintance in question.

They ground their teeth in concert in savage consternation.

"That traitor is Ben Britton," hissed Rodman, otherwise Gilman, as he tried to free himself from the stout cords which had been placed around his wrists.

"Yes, I've let a little light into your darkness," admitted Britton, presenting himself to their view. "Would you have me stand by and see the confidence of a sorrowing young lady abused by two such worthless ruffians?"

"Oh, it's all right," exclaimed Potter, otherwise Brower. "The day'll come when you'll hear from us, Ben Britton!"

"It'll be after you've carried a ball and chain awhile as deserters, I think," said the officer, with a smile of satisfaction at the night's work. "And with this we'll take our departure."

Five minutes later the two villains had passed out of sight and bearing with their captors, and Ben Britton was explaining to Alice and Mrs. Dayton just how the arrest had been managed, and what would be the probable consequence of their appearance before a court-martial.

"You can now rid yourself of all anxiety respecting them," he concluded. "True, you have spent a week in traveling upon their impostures, but there is a greater degree of truth in their representations than they would have dared to imagine!"

Alice assented with a face beaming with joy. "Would it be safe for me to go on toward the Rockies, Mr. Britton?" she asked—"to the spot, I mean, where my father is held a prisoner by the Red Ransomers?"

"Certainly, especially if I go with you as guide. The company of Captain Haskell is nearly a hundred strong, and the intention of the expedition is to remain at the Dead Man's Ranch—that's the spot where they are encamped—until Mr. Hamlin has been released, and even until the Red Ransomers have received their final quietus. If you are not too tired, therefore, with the journey you have already accomplished—"

"Oh, I could travel a lifetime without fatigue with such an object in view!" declared Alice earnestly.

"Then suppose I join your little party as guide and scout," proposed Britton, "and we'll all push on in the morning for the Rockies!"

"If you will be so kind, Mr. Britton," returned Alice earnestly. "I shall never cease to be grateful. As to the business terms of your services—"

"We need not speak of that now, Miss Hamlin," said Britton. "Ask any officer of the army, or any man who knows Ben Britton, and he will tell you that I'm all right. At what hour will you be ready to start?"

"Suppose we say at daylight?" suggested Alice, after a word with Mrs. Dayton.

"So be it. I will talk with Mr. Dayton, and everything shall be ready."

He withdrew with this assurance, and Alice and Mrs. Dayton were left to their great and joyous excitement.

It was no wonder that sleep fled far from them.

They talked and talked until long after midnight, and each would have gladly talked until the new day, if it had not been that each was solicitous for the health of the other.

Alice especially was in a thrill of eagerness to go to her father's rescue, but at last they slept.

CHAPTER XVIII.

INTO THE ROCKIES AND THE ROBBER'S GRIP.

ALL the night long Ben Britton sat or stood about the little camp, with a well-tried double-barreled rifle in his hands, but he did not have occasion to use it.

Nothing was seen of a disquieting nature.

It was in vain that Mr. Dayton and his young men offered to take their share of watching.

"You just do as I tell you while you have the chance," was Britton's answer to their suggestions. "You've been watching lately, and I haven't. I'll see that you get enough of the business before I leave you!"

The night at length wore away, and the little cavalcade resumed its course to the westward.

All was now hopefulness and animation.

Any one who had seen the party the day previous would have hardly been able to recognize it as the same, so greatly had the substitution of Ben Britton for the two plotters changed all its aspects.

The explorers knew now just whither they were bound, and they had faith in their guide.

The day passed without incident, except that Britton reported that a considerable band of Arapahoes had passed to the northward during the night preceding.

It was a cheerful camp-fire around which the scout and his new friends gathered early in the evening.

The progress had been excellent, the horses were all well; good water was at command in any desirable quantity; the weather was simply splendid; and all the events and conversations of the day had tended to make Alice very hopeful about the results of her bold expedition.

The second day of the journey under Britton's guidance was even more agreeable than the first. More distance was traversed, and Alice grew more and more content ever hour with her situation and prospects.

Several other days of this description passed as if by enchantment, and the little cavalcade approached the foothills which descend from the Rockies into the plains of Colorado.

"Before this time to-morrow," said Britton to the ladies, with great satisfaction, after all had been made snug for the night, "we shall be within a few miles of Captain Haskell, my old friend and commander."

"And this is as much as to say that we shall

be safe from both robbers and red-skins," responded Mrs. Dayton.

"Yes, it is, and also as much as to say that we shall be in a position to take some measure for father's relief," declared Alice, earnestly. "How eager I am to see him!"

The following afternoon was drawing to a close when the little cavalcade entered one of those great solitudes which are still to be found in the midst of the Rockies.

"What I am looking for now," observed Britton, with keen glances ahead, "is that Rolling Tavern, of which I have repeatedly spoken. My idea is to put up there to-night. It certainly ought to be visible within a few minutes."

It was in vain, however, that he scanned the surface of the plains.

"I see," he finally ejaculated, with an air of disappointment. "Since I quit the neighborhood, the Rolling Tavern has rolled on to some new destination."

"But can we not follow it?" asked Alice.

"Not at this late hour, considering that we have no information concerning the route it has taken," replied Britton. "Besides, I have gone quite as far into the wilderness as is desirable."

"Then what are we to do, sir?"

"We must be content to pass another night in the style of the last week or two. We cannot do better than to pitch your tent in the edge of the clearing which was so lately occupied by the Rolling Tavern."

The suggestion was duly acted upon, and in the course of another hour—by the time the shadows of evening began falling—Alice and her friends had eaten their suppers and gathered around the camp-fire which Mr. Dayton and his young friends had been prompt to kindle.

A long conversation succeeded, every one taking more or less part in it, speaking of the troops of Captain Haskell, the Red Ransomers, the Rolling Tavern, and the other topics belonging to the scene, and then Mrs. Dayton and Alice retired to their tent for the night.

They were still discussing the various great problems of their situation and of the morrow, when the figure of a man crept up to the rear of their tent in the profound darkness, and stole a sharp glance at them through a small slit he made in the canvas.

This daring intruder was Captain Ready!

The presence of the chief of the Red Ransomers was as simple as natural.

He had received a few severe bruises, and had for a few minutes lain insensible, as the result of the tumble he had received at the hands of Roger Hamlin, but he had scarcely given a thought to his injuries, so entirely was he preoccupied by the fact that his prisoner had made his escape.

How quickly he had summoned his immediate followers—how promptly he had aroused his camp—and how sleeplessly and untiringly he had since sought everywhere for Nick and the escaped prisoner, will be readily divined without the necessity of a word on the subject.

That this vain search had been one long wrath and vexation to the chief of the Red Ransomers, may be accepted as a mere matter of course.

He did not so much care, he said, for the handsome fortune he had lost in losing Mr. Hamlin, but he hated to be beaten, and especially did he regret the loss of prestige the escape was sure to cause him.

An almost savage expression could have been seen on his face, as he thus peered in upon Alice and Mrs. Dayton.

The bright scene within the tent not only struck him forcibly, but it aroused at once a keen curiosity and interest.

"A woman!" he mentally ejaculated. "Two of them! Evidently mother and daughter. What a fairy that girl is! What is she doing here? Who is she?"

He looked again and again, listening to the conversation of the ladies.

A flood of eager questions surged into his soul.

His dark features lighted up strangely.

"Who can they be?" was the thought with which he turned away. "And what is their business in this pokerish region?"

Still keeping in the shadow of the tent, he bent a keen glance of inquiry upon the various features of the little camp.

"Evidently some family from the East," he said, to himself, as his glances followed the movements of Mr. Dayton and his aids, who were watering their horses. "They are either very brave or very foolish to come here in such small numbers. They must know that there are hostiles at no great distance, and plenty of reds near at hand who are ready to become hostiles the minute they find at their mercy a white man who has a dollar on his person. Possibly that old fellow," and he glanced at Mr. Dayton again, "has no suspicion of the danger into which he is rushing his family. They may all be killed before morning! It really beats me to see the fellow so foolish. I ought to warn him, and I will."

Advancing boldly to the spot where Mr. Dayton was busy, the robber-chief saluted him respectfully, and opened a conversation, beginning

with a remark about the fine day they had been having.

"Yes, sir, a remarkable day for the season," returned Dayton, scanning the new-comer closely, with the aid of a lighted lantern. "Belong hereabouts, sir?"

"A few miles to the westward."

"You seem to be alone, and I am pleased to note the fact," observed Dayton, after a keen look in the direction from which Captain Ready had come. "I take your presence as a proof that we are safe here."

"That hardly follows, sir," returned Ready, with a smile. "Have you seen forty or fifty stray cattle in the course of the afternoon?"

"No, sir. Lost any?"

"Yes. A drove of the kind has given one of my men the slip. Are you from the East?"

"From the Missouri."

"You are? I'm from that region myself."

"From what point do you come?"

"From near Leavenworth."

"Indeed!" cried Ready, with a start of keen interest. "I have many good friends in that neighborhood, and am glad to have met you. My name is Hobart."

"Mine, sir, is Dayton."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Dayton," said Ready, "that you have gone into camp here. My ranch would have been far more comfortable and safe. Are you aware that you are exposing your wife and daughter, to say nothing of yourself and boys, to rather more peril than I would care to encounter?"

"To be frank, sir," admitted Dayton, "I am not entirely pleased with our situation or our surroundings. We expected to find the Rolling Tavern here, or we should have halted sooner. I expected also to connect with Captain Haskell and his men in the course of the evening, but I've about given up the hope of doing so."

"Is Captain Haskell your friend?" asked Ready, with marked interest.

"No, sir; but my friend yonder, Mr. Britton, was lately a member of his company."

"I've heard of him," avowed Ready, peering sharply through the gloom at the object of his remark, who was helping the young men erect an impromptu shelter. "Is he conducting you to Haskell?"

"Well, yes—it amounts to that."

"And will your wife and daughter—"

"Excuse me, sir," interrupted Dayton, "the youngest lady is not my daughter, but the daughter of my best friend and benefactor. She is Miss Alice Hamlin."

"Hamlin!" repeated Captain Ready, with a wild start. "Did you say Hamlin?"

"Certainly—Hamlin! The young lady is the only daughter of Mr. Roger Hamlin!"

It was well the darkness afforded a convenient mantle to Captain Ready, as his wild start of surprise and his sudden emotion must have betrayed him.

What a joyous discovery! What a startling compensation for the escape of Mr. Hamlin!

What a singular fatality indeed, that the daughter should fall into the very hands from which her father had so lately escaped!

It was nearly a minute before the chief of the Red Ransomers could find his voice, or school his features to the necessary calmness.

In all his wide experiences he had never before had such an astounding stroke of good fortune.

"That young lady is Miss Hamlin, then?" he said, speaking rather to himself than to Mr. Dayton.

"She is, sir. You appear to be surprised—or interested. Are you acquainted with her father?"

"Only by reputation. But what is she doing here? Is the other lady her mother?"

"No. The other lady is Mrs. Dayton."

"But what are you all doing here—if the question is not impertinent?"

"We have come to invoke the aid of the military, or to take all other possible means, for the release of Mr. Hamlin, who has fallen into the hands of the Red Ransomers!"

The robber-chief started again, but managed to retain his self-control.

He saw all at a glance!

The story of Mr. Hamlin's captivity had reached his family, and this fair girl, heeding only the dictates of her heart, had come to his relief!

"As brave as beautiful!" said Ready to himself, looking in the direction of the tent. "What a prize has fallen into my hands! What a flutter she has already given my heart!"

He stood as if entranced, Mr. Dayton meanwhile looking wonderingly at him, but at length he asked:

"Who told Miss Hamlin of her father's misfortunes?"

"Our friend here, Mr. Britton."

"I see," said Ready. "Britton has been a cavalryman, so it is perfectly natural for the information in question to reach him. But that is not the secret of the emotion you have detected, Mr. Dayton," he added, noticing that the latter was regarding him with an earnestness indicative of wonder or suspicion. "What has struck me as so singular is the fact that I am in a position to give you some very surprising in-

formation. In a word, Mr. Hamlin made his escape early this morning from the robbers, and is safe at this moment in the midst of Captain Haskell's camp!"

"Is it possible?" was Dayton's comment upon this improvised declaration.

"You can depend upon it!"

"A thousand thanks for this information," exclaimed Dayton. "Your good sense, Mr. Hobart, as well as your feelings, will tell you how very glad Miss Hamlin will be to hear this news from you! Will you kindly walk in a moment and see her?"

"With great pleasure!"

It was all Ready could say!

His soul was filled to bursting with a joy truly infernal.

The presentation followed in due course and Ready repeated his declarations, giving pretended details.

The joy with which Alice listened to them can only be imagined.

Her father safe, and she so near him!

What gladness!

What an ample reward were these assurances for all she had suffered!

How brightly beamed her eyes upon the new-comer!

She did not fail to notice, of course, that the visitor was rather jaunty-looking for a ranchman, but she explained that by the very fact of his residence in the great solitudes around her.

"I am very glad to have met you, Mr. Hobart," she declared, with a depth of feeling which greatly enhanced her loveliness. "I have no words at command to express the joy you have given me. Can I not go to my father instantly?"

The robber-chief shook his head.

"I am sorry to say that Captain Haskell has broken camp during the afternoon—evidently for greater security—and that I have no idea where he is. The only thing you can do is to honor my ranch with a visit!"

He inclined himself profoundly.

"We shall be safe there, in the midst of my herders," he added, "and you will no longer be in peril of falling into the hands of white outlaws or Indians!"

The mien of Dayton showed that he was favorably impressed by this proposition.

"We'll go home with Mr. Hobart of course," said Alice, "if he will kindly excuse the trouble we make him!"

"The little I can do for you will be a great pleasure," assured Ready, as he bowed low to hide the crafty and jubilant expression which had appeared in his eyes. "My home is not a palace, but it is far more comfortable than your tent, and a thousand times safer."

"Let's be off as soon as we can, Mr. Dayton," proposed Alice, all eagerness. "Mr. Britton can of course have no objections to our removal, when he understands the situation."

"Certainly not. I've already spoken to him," replied Dayton, "and we are almost ready for departure."

A few minutes sufficed to complete the necessary preparations, and the little cavalcade then resumed its course to the westward, Captain Ready leading the way!

CHAPTER XIX.

THE DOUBLE QUEST.

"Now for a plan of action, Mr. Hamlin," said Nick Peddie to the escaped prisoner as they emerged from the creek leading to the cave. "What are we to do?"

"First, we must put a mile or two between us and Ready and his men, if we can," replied Hamlin. "I think I hear voices and the galloping of horses. Come."

They walked their horses a short distance, until quite sure that the man to whom Ready had alluded had reached the creek where their leader was lying.

"Hark!" then enjoined Hamlin, drawing rein.

There was no mistaking the uproar which arose behind them.

"They've found the captain," observed Hamlin, as he resumed progress. "No doubt all their attention will be given to him during the next few minutes, or until he recovers his senses, and is able to explain what has happened and give them directions."

Nick assented to this view.

"We must accordingly improve the time thus afforded us," continued the escaped prisoner. "Do you know where Haskell is encamped?"

"No, sir—I am sorry to say—and if I did it would be impossible for me to lay out a course in that direction. I am as good as lost, sir!"

"My case exactly," answered Hamlin with a sigh. "I was transferred at dead of night from my old prison to the cave where you found me, and I have no idea just where it is."

"Well, we are certainly in a good hiding-place," declared Nick, with his usual cheerful air, and I must say that this is the one great essential of the moment. Have the robbers any hounds or other dogs?"

"Not to my knowledge. I've never seen any, or even heard them."

"Then I think the Ransomers will not be able to track us. Their scouting service is not likely to be first class."

He reflected a few moments and added:

"We are now going directly away from the camp of the robbers, and consequently away from Haskell. This is not a good thing to do, for many reasons. We had better bear away to the left, and gradually face about, maintaining our present slow pace, and making frequent pauses to listen. In this way we shall keep our horses ready for any emergency, and be getting nearer to Haskell with every step."

These suggestions met with an unqualified approval from Hamlin, and no time was lost in acting upon them.

"The captain spoke of a message you had sent by some 'chance pilgrim,' Mr. Hamlin," resumed Nick. "Have you any hope that any good will result from it?"

"Not the least, and the prisoner sighed profoundly. "That 'chance pilgrim' was a discharged soldier from one of the forts west of us who had been captured by the robbers and forced to join them. He happened to be on guard over me one night at my old prison, and I had a long talk with him, the result of which was that he agreed to make his escape on the following day and set out for my home on the Missouri. I accordingly gave him a few lines to my wife, giving him full instructions for finding her, and he solemnly promised that he would deliver my message personally, and consult with my wife and friends as to the best way of effecting my release."

"And you have no knowledge of what resulted from this measure?"

"Not the slightest, Mr. Peddie, but I can only suppose—nine weeks having passed since his departure—that no good is likely to result from it. It's only reasonable to fear that my messenger was killed by the Indians, or that he has sickened and died on his way to the East, or that some other fatality has negated the whole project. It would be an act of folly, after all these weeks of waiting, to build the least hope upon it."

During the next hour, as the two men wandered through the great forest, endeavoring to get some clew to the whereabouts of Captain Haskell's headquarters, they exchanged the outlines of their respective histories, and conceived a very cordial respect and esteem for each other.

They were in the act of scanning their surroundings eagerly, with the hope of making some discovery that would throw light upon their whereabouts, when Mr. Hamlin started violently, with a flush of excitement.

"Why, there is my old prison!" he exclaimed, in a cautious tone, as he waved his hand toward a curious butte which towered up, jagged and barren, in the midst of a narrow and rugged valley. "Let's be sure that the robbers are no longer making any use of it."

The couple drew rein, peering out into the open space of which the butte was the center.

As they did so, a couple of vultures came flying heavily toward the butte, and alighted near its foot on the side nearest the watchers.

Looking closer, the fugitives saw that the object of the vultures' attention was the carcass of a horse which was little more than a skeleton, so long had these birds of prey been giving it their attention.

"Evidently enough," said Nick, "there's no human being hereabouts save ourselves, or those birds would announce the fact in their usual noisy fashion."

He advanced a few paces, so as to show himself to a third vulture which was seated on one of the crests of the butte.

As he had foreseen the ungainly creature craned its neck and flapped its wings at sight of him, setting up a loud chatter, and the two birds below hastened to rise toward it, and all three flew heavily away in a direct line of retreat from the fugitives.

"You see, sir?" queried Nick. "There's no one here save ourselves. Furthermore, there's not likely to be any camp in the direction those birds are taking. We had better turn to the right or left."

The escaped prisoner was slowly munching a morsel of dried beef to which he had helped himself a few moments before.

He was very pale, and the manner in which he swayed in his saddle, clinging to it with one hand, was in itself a sufficient indication that he was as weak as a child.

"I realize now," he said, "how hard I toiled and how much strength I used, in getting clear of that terrible chain I have left behind me. A reaction has set in naturally enough. I can hardly keep my saddle."

"In that case, sir," suggested Nick, "why not remain at this butte, which is certainly a well-defined landmark, while I go alone in quest of Haskell's camp and the necessary assistance?"

"I've been thinking of that," returned the escaped prisoner. "Clearly enough, as I now feel, I should be a dead weight upon your hands if we should be so unfortunate as to encounter any of the robbers."

"Then why not remain here a few hours, or until I have made a thorough attempt to con-

nect with Captain Haskell?" pursued Nick. "Is there a cave in the butte?"

"No, a mere hollow at its base—a sort of burrow partly sheltered by the overhanging rock. It's just the other side of that dead horse. The robbers had a tent at the spot where you see those burnt and withered trees, which were killed by the heat and smoke of their fire. Certainly, I couldn't have a better hiding-place. The Ransomers would never suspect me of going back to my old prison for security—never!"

"And that is one of the many reasons why you should remain here for a few hours, Mr. Hamlin," declared Nick. "I shudder at the thought of encountering the robbers while you are in this helpless condition. The fact of finding those vultures in undisturbed possession is a pretty good assurance that you will not be disturbed here during my absence, while the prominence of the butte is a proof that I shall have no difficulty about returning to you as soon as I have found Haskell."

"I agree with you, Mr. Peddie, in regard to all these matters," declared Hamlin. "Let's ride nearer, and see if there is any trace of recent human occupation."

The couple were soon at the base of the butte, on the side from which they had approached, and here they dismounted, with many a keen glance around.

"It's doubtful if any one has been here since I was removed to the cave," observed Hamlin, after a thorough survey of his surroundings. "I feel that I shall be safe here until your return. This rest in the open air cannot fail to do me a great deal of good."

"Of course you will retain your horse, securing him to one of these saplings so that he cannot take leave of you," suggested Nick. "I will also leave with you the bulk of the provisions we have brought with us. Be sure that I shall be very prudent and careful in every step I take after leaving you, for I feel that your final deliverance and safety depend entirely upon me."

"It's hardly necessary to say, Mr. Peddie, that you have my best thanks," assured the escaped prisoner, as he took possession of the nook in which he proposed to remain hidden until Nick's return. "Do not get desperate or flurried. Remember that I am in a position to pass a number of days here in comfort, and that I shall be gaining strength every moment."

A few further suggestions were exchanged and then Nick shook hands heartily with his new friend, uttering a final encouraging remark, and took his departure, walking away in watchful silence, and leading his horse by the bridle.

A single whinny came from the horse of the escaped prisoner, as if it was conscious of the solitude in which it had been left, and then all became still behind Nick, while a group of intervening trees shut him out from the view of the men whose acquaintance he had so strangely made, and in whom he had already become almost as much interested as if he had been his own father.

"Most assuredly, I will save him from these infernal blackguards, or die in the attempt," was the resolution with which he turned anew to the weighty problem now devolving upon him.

CHAPTER XX.

INTO THE RED CAMP AGAIN.

NICK mounted, as soon as his route had become reasonably open, and pressed on with an energy which was equaled only by his caution.

Another hour was spent in wandering, watching, and listening, and still the great solitude around Nick remained as tenantless as ever.

At the end of this time, however, he struck a trail which seemed to be indicated on a manuscript map of the Dead Man's Ranch and its surroundings which had been furnished him by the man of whom he purchased it, and this suggestion of an eventual outcome gave him a thrill of joy.

He was just congratulating himself on this circumstance, when he saw a soldier approaching on horseback who appeared to be absorbed in the perusal of a newspaper.

At any rate, it could not be seen that he looked either to the right or to the left, or was even conscious of his whereabouts.

Naturally enough, the face of Nick Peddie brightened at the sight.

Here was not only a soldier, but here also was a guide who could and would conduct him as speedily as possible to the presence of Captain Haskell!

He hastened to place himself directly in the soldier's path, at the same time smiling indulgently at the complete absorption of that worthy in the sheet he was honoring with his attention.

Nick "knew how it was himself."

In the course of his travels, he had often been a week or a fortnight without news of any kind, and hence he had personally experienced the ardor with which a stray copy of a leading newspaper is regarded under such circumstances.

"Don't run over me," he finally called, smilingly.

The soldier started, and looked up, with a manner that struck Nick as singular.

"It must be that I owe you something," pur-

sued Nick, after exchanging salutations with the new-comer. "You are certainly looking very hard at me!"

The man reddened, as he folded up his newspaper and slipped it into his pocket.

"That's merely because I am surprised to see you alone, sir," he explained. "I supposed you were with Captain Haskell!"

"Can you tell me where the captain is at this moment?" asked Nick, determined not to lose a moment in getting the relief he wanted for Mr. Hamlin.

"Certainly. At his camp."

"Are you bound that way?"

The man assented.

"Then I will join you," said Nick, reining his horse accordingly. "I am very anxious to see Captain Haskell."

The man nodded assent, with a reserve not at all unbecoming his supposed character.

For a few minutes the couple jogged on quietly, hardly exchanging a remark.

"Do you hear anything, sir?" then asked the new-comer abruptly.

"I certainly do," answered Nick, after listening a moment—"the clatter of horses galloping like Jehu!"

"They may be robbers," suggested the soldier. "Most likely they are. Suppose we turn into the bushes here and lie low until this caravan has passed us?"

"Just as you think best."

"Come, then."

The two men slipped into the bushes indicated, coming to a halt.

The horsemen they had heard came nearer rapidly, and were soon abreast of the spot in which Nick and his new acquaintance had taken refuge.

"They are soldiers," then ejaculated Nick, catching a glimpse of them.

In response to this the soldier at his side uttered a yell that would have aroused the seven sleepers.

And as Nick turned toward him to demand the reason of this strange conduct, the cold muzzle of a revolver was placed against his temple.

"No resistance now," ordered the soldier, as the new-comers came flocking around him with leveled revolvers. "You are our prisoner. A word or a move, and you die!"

The disgust of Nick at this surprising turn of affairs was intense.

He gave utterance to words which we refrain from recording.

"I don't care whose prisoner I am," he scowled, "nor what you do with me! But if I ever see again the man who sold me the Dead Man's Ranch—"

The threat was not finished.

The glances of Nick, which had naturally passed inquiringly over the new-comers, had suddenly encountered a figure with which he had some acquaintance.

"So I see you again, Mr. Prairie Kitten?" he resumed.

"The pleasure is reciprocal," replied Dan, who will be remembered as the first person who presented himself to Nick's gaze after the unconsciousness which had succeeded his exploits as Mazeppa. "Stand back, boys. We're not to hurt him, you'll remember. All the cap'n requires is his safe-keeping, and that is a matter for which I will be responsible."

"It is to the 'cap'n,' then, that I must express my thanks for this abridgment of my liberties?" pursued Nick.

"It is, Mr. Peddie."

"What does he want of me?"

"Nothing in particular, beyond your capture and safe-keeping. If your memory's good you'll recollect that you were in the society of Mr. Hamlin at the moment when this gentleman gave the captain such a flight down the cliff from the mouth of the cave—"

"Yes, I was there, and I gave the captain an explanation of my presence. Certainly he can have no feeling against me for the acts of Mr. Hamlin, since I am in no wise responsible for them."

"Certainly not," assented Dan. "But as you were with Mr. Hamlin at the moment of his flight, it's only fair to suppose that you fled with him, and that you know where he is hidden!"

Nick was silent, reflecting upon the situation thus presented.

"In other terms," pursued Dan, "the captain thought a new glimpse of you might lead to another of Mr. Hamlin, as you left the cave with him."

"Well reasoned, I admit."

"The captain accordingly gave us orders to arrest you at sight, and hold you in safe custody till he sees you, but not to be rough or unnecessarily violent."

"Thanks for the information. Where is the captain? Can't I see him?"

"You'll hardly see him before night, sir. He's busy."

The features of Nick expressed plainly enough the disgust these words caused him.

"If all this is unpleasant," resumed Dan, scanning the features of his prisoner, "there is an easy way out of the box in which you find yourself."

"Name it."

"You have only to guide us to the spot where you left Mr. Hamlin. Put that man in my hands, sir, and you may go where you like."

"That's something I can't do—not even to oblige you, as much as I would like to be agreeable, Dan."

"Why not?"

"Because I do not know where he is."

"Where were you bound when my men met you?"

"Just where I have been bound for a week past—to the Dead Man's Ranch, my new and valuable farm!"

The statement was true enough—with the simple mental proviso that he was advancing toward his ranch somewhat indirectly!

"And you left Hamlin—where?"

"Not far from the cave."

This, too, was true!

"Two miles or ten—the distance was not far."

"And you can't take us to him?"

"I beg to be excused."

"You've no idea where he went when you left him?"

"All I can tell you is that his great anxiety seemed to be to reach the camp of Captain Haskell. You had better look for him there."

"That's a thing we'll do—at the right moment," declared Dan. "From all this it appears, Mr. Peddie, that we are not to have your assistance in the search we are making for Mr. Hamlin?"

"For the reasons I have given—and others!"

"Especially the others. And such being the fact, we may as well resume the search, boys, in our own fashion. Fall in."

The little party was soon in progress, the pretended soldiers crowding around Nick in such a way that he had no chance of escape, especially as his horse was led by one of his captors.

"As you see, Mr. Peddie," observed Dan, complacently, "the intrusion of Haskell and his men in plain clothes gave us an idea which we have been prompt to act upon. If he and his troopers figure as robbers, it's only fair for the robbers to figure as soldiers. At any rate, we have found that it pays the first time trying!"

Nick assented, but he didn't feel at all inclined to talk.

His thoughts were too busy.

How was he to get out of the clutches of his captors?

And what was to become of Mr. Hamlin?

Nick was taken in due course to the camp of the Red Ransomers, who were not a little excited at his return under such circumstances, and crowded around Dan with a flood of eager inquiries.

Responding in as few words as possible Dan took his prisoner to a large tent in the middle of the camp which was known as the guard-house.

"Now, Mr. Peddie," said Dan, "if you will pledge me your word of honor not to leave us until you have seen Captain Ready, I will leave you in perfect freedom, and consider you a guest rather than a prisoner."

"You are very kind, I'm sure," returned Nick, "but I do not feel inclined to give any such promise. I'm afraid I might be tempted to break it. As you'll readily comprehend, Dan, it's going to be a very dull business for me to wait here indefinitely for the captain's return, and at the same time feel bound by such a promise as you have suggested. I'd sooner retain my liberty of action, and feel free to take French leave of you whenever I can."

Dan smiled grimly.

Evidently the answer did not please him.

"If these are your views," he muttered, "you need not wonder if I take a few precautions for your safe keeping."

"Take all you like, of course."

A prisoner of Nick's sort had never before been in Dan's hands, and for a moment he was at a loss just how to prevent him from running away, and at the same time treat him in a gentlemanly fashion.

The decision to which he came was a sort of compromise between the two courses open to him, or between rigor and kindness.

He left Nick in full possession of his personal liberty, but at the same time posted a couple of armed robbers at the door of the tent, with orders not to lose sight of him, and to shoot him down without the least hesitation if he made any attempt to escape.

"Of course I'll let you know as soon as Captain Ready returns, sir," said Dan, as he turned away, "and in the mean time recommend you to be patient. I'll send you the latest papers, with some books, and a supply of refreshments—in a word, treat you as handsomely as possible."

"I'm greatly obliged, Dan."

"Don't mention it, sir," and Dan inclined himself. "I think I know what I'm about. Ten to one—yes, a hundred to one—after you have taken a look at that famous farm of yours, you'll be ready to join our band unconditionally!"

Nick could not help smiling at the suggestion, and Dan went away with the idea that he was not likely to have the least trouble with him.

We need not pause upon the dullness of the

captivity that succeeded, notwithstanding the attentions with which it was mitigated.

Nick couldn't get the escaped prisoner out of his mind.

The day wore away slowly, without bringing Captain Ready, and night again set in.

Watching and listening, Nick had no trouble in detecting that sentries were posted at sundown around the camp, in regular military fashion, and this circumstance threw a profound gloom over him, as he had almost made up his mind to make a dash for liberty with the coming of night.

He noticed that camp-fires were kindled in two or three places, and that there was a great deal of consultation and bustle around him, as if the Red Ransomers were keenly alive to the presence of Captain Haskell and his soldiers at no great distance.

As weary and weak as he was, Nick did not feel like closing his eyes in slumber.

He was too anxious in a thousand ways—not merely for himself, but on account of Mr. Hamlin.

What misery it was to realize how anxiously the escaped prisoner was at that moment waiting and watching for his return.

The night had barely set in, when Nick heard a slight and curious scratching upon the wall of the tent immediately behind him.

His first thought was that some insect was climbing over the canvas, or that the wind had blown the end of some branch of a tree against it, but a few repetitions of the sounds told him to the contrary.

There was a certain method about them, as about the clicks of a telegrapher, which quickly suggested a human presence.

Keeping one eye upon his guardians and the other upon the wall of the tent, Nick soon detected a hand under the edge of the canvas, and in this hand a slip of paper containing a line or two which he hastened to read:

"A friend is here," began the communication, "As soon as the attention of your keepers is called in the other direction, crawl under the edge of the tent to the rear, and I'll answer for the rest."

Nick looked up as he reached the concluding word, and met the glance of an eye that was peering through an almost imperceptible slit in the tent behind him.

Nodding understandingly, as he completed the communication, he gave his attention to the two outlaws who were standing guard over him.

The next instant he saw that they were looking excitedly out into the camp.

"Why, what's that?" cried one.

"A fire-ball," returned the other, as he stepped out of the tent. "See!"

Both became all attention.

Nick comprehended, with the aid of a gleam of light that suddenly presented itself a few rods away, in the midst of the camp.

The unknown had lighted a ball of some very combustible material, and given it a roll in that direction, and there it lay, flaming up briskly and brightly.

The incident was just enough, of course, to fix the attention of the two sentries, without inspiring them with either apprehension or suspicion.

One of them still remained in the tent, but the gaze of both turned inquiringly upon the mysterious flame, and the prisoner took temporarily the second place in their thoughts.

That moment did not pass without due action on the part of the prisoner.

He glided under the edge of the tent and gained his feet, finding himself in the presence of an unknown, who caught him by the hand and hurried him away with as much celerity as silence.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE TERRIBLE FIND.

ALONG an old Spanish trail, not far to the westward of the Missouri River, a horseman was riding quietly southward.

A pair of saddlebags were slung across the withers of his horse, and the handle of a revolver was visible in a leather belt by which his waist was incircled.

The countenance of the young horseman was as indicative of honesty and honor as of intelligence, and his mien was as frank as engaging.

His age was barely one-and-twenty.

"How far to Dobb's Landing, sir?" he asked of a farmer trudging heavily homeward, whom he chanced to encounter unexpectedly.

"At least seven miles," was the answer.

"So far? They told me quite a distance back that it was only eight."

The farmer smiled understandingly.

"That was because they reckoned a short-cut across the bend," he explained. "But it's getting so dark that you'll hardly venture to take the short-cut."

"Why not?"

"Because the road's not safe! There have lately been several murders and robberies upon it!"

"Indeed? Why have not the evil-doers been hunted and exterminated?"

"The sheriff has hunted them, and is still at

it, but the 'extermination' seems as far off as ever!"

"And no one knows who or what—"

"Excuse me, stranger," interrupted the farmer, with an excited start and a wondering air, "but the man who has been engaged in this sorry work has a good deal of your appearance, is about your size and build, rides just such a black horse, and is always on the move at just about this hour, or at nightfall! Of course I do not mean to insinuate that you are the famous 'black horseman,' sir."

"Then, of course, I can take no offense," returned the horseman, smilingly. "I ought rather to thank you for giving me these details, since I shall lose no time in ridding myself of a resemblance which may prove dangerous. But if I make these seven miles—which I am anxious to do, I must not linger here. Good-night, sir."

The farmer returned the salutation, and the horseman resumed his journey.

"I hope the farm at Dobb's Landing will suit me," was his thought. "I'm tired of looking about for land, and shall be glad to get settled."

The horseman continued to ride thoughtfully onward, while the shades of evening fell softly around him.

A steamboat on the river overtook and passed him, its bright lights rendering by contrast the succeeding darkness all the more noticeable.

Then the road began to run under one of those long fringes of trees, principally cottonwoods, by which large tracts of the Missouri bottoms are distinguished.

"A pokerish place," ejaculated the traveler, with a keen glance around. "I wish I were well out of it."

He continued to press forward.

The road soon wound down a considerable bluff to a marked depression in the form of a lateral ravine, which was more or less densely wooded.

The darkness under the shadow of the thick foliage became more intense.

Beyond the lateral ravine, the bank presented itself in its ordinary form.

Anon the road became more open, rising away from the river.

The horseman was just congratulating himself upon the change in his surroundings, when his horse halted abruptly, snorting loudly, and reeling in affright.

The rider naturally listened, looking keenly around.

The clatter of a horse's hoofs at so great a distance was distinctly audible.

Evidently some one was in furious progress.

Going or coming?

A moment's listening assured the horseman that the stranger was retreating.

The sounds of the mad gallop died out rapidly.

"Probably he's taking that short cut of which the farmer spoke," was the thought of the traveler. "At any rate, he's getting away at a lively pace."

Gradually the clatter of hoofs grew less and less on the hearing of the horseman, and at length died out altogether.

"Push ahead, old fellow," then enjoined our traveler, chirping to his horse. "We're getting belated."

The horse only reared and plunged more violently.

His snorts of affright deepened.

His ears were fixed in the direction of a clump of bushes at one side of the road just ahead of him.

His nostrils dilated wildly.

"There's really something in the way then?" muttered the horseman, as he leaped to the ground. "What can it be?"

Proceeding in the direction so clearly indicated by his steed, and dragging the unwilling animal after him, his inquiring glances soon encountered the outlines of a man in the edge of the clump of bushes to which we have alluded.

"Hallo there!" cried the startled investigator.

"What's the matter?" No response was made, unless we reckon as such a groan which came from the recumbent figure.

"Well, this looks like foul work," ejaculated our traveler, extending his hand to the figure, and then starting at the discovery that his fingers had come in contact with blood. "The man has just been murdered."

Another faint groan from the victim, and then all became still.

Startled and dazed, yet with some instinctive idea of ministering to the dire necessity of a fellow-being, the horseman bent over the motionless figure, thrusting his hand in upon the heart.

For an instant he thought he could detect a faint fluttering, but nothing to relieve the horror of his first conviction.

The unknown had just expired, or was in the act of expiring, and it was equally clear that he had been murdered.

A long knife was still sticking in his vitals.

"Great heavens! how horrible!" was the involuntary ejaculation of the traveler, as he gained his feet and looked anxiously around.

"Who is he, and who has done this thing? What ought I to do?"

The horseman did not ever think of personal danger.

Here was a dead man, and it seemed desirable to get some clue to his identity.

Having matches on his person the traveler hastily lighted one, and improvised a torch from a dry splinter that came readily to his hand.

Then he renewed his examination of the body, still holding his horse by the bridle.

Such was his attitude, when three men suddenly darted from the cover of the adjacent trees, and hurled themselves resolutely upon him.

"At last, my fine fellow!" was the greeting of the most active of his assailants. "We've caught you in the act. No resistance, or we'll kill you!"

At sight of the inflamed faces before him, the traveler realized his peril.

"Who are you?" he asked.

"I'm the sheriff of this county," was the reply of the leader of the three men, "and it's not without reason, you see, that I've been looking for you so long."

It was in vain that the prisoner attempted to explain matters.

His captors would not even hear what he so much wished to say.

"It's as clear as day that you killed the man," one of them assured him, "and we don't wish to hear another word of denial. Better be silent!"

Binding their prisoner hand and foot, the three men flung him into a wagon in waiting. Then they placed the dead man beside him, and started for the county jail, which was also the way to the nearest village.

Of course the traveler told his story, as soon as he could get the chance of doing so.

He was Gordon Vorce, of Atchison.

He had been looking for a satisfactory quarter-section, with a view to the removal of his family into the country.

All his family came forward earnestly with their testimony, as did a large number of friends and neighbors.

His reputation had been without a blemish.

He had been a hard worker, honest, and devoted to his parents—in every way a very worthy and exemplary young man.

We need not pause upon the result.

The earnest protests of the prisoner, his previous good character, the influence of his family and friends, all failed to produce any marked sentiment in his favor.

No one knew who the dead man was, as he had come from some remote point of the East, but the authorities were not any the less determined on that account to vindicate the law.

Gordon Vorce would surely have been found guilty of murder, if one of the jurymen, taking pity on him, or disturbed by his passionate protestations of innocence, suggested that there might have been some quarrel between the dead man and the prisoner, and that the fatal blow might have been dealt in the heat of passion, as it was clear enough that it had not been prompted by greed for money.

This suggestion sufficed for the end for which it was made, permitting a verdict for manslaughter, and, as the result of the case, Gordon Vorce was sentenced to twenty years at hard labor in the State Prison.

CHAPTER XXII.

A BRAVE MAN'S DESPERATION.

THE day after receiving his sentence, Gordon Vorce was put into a stage, under strong guard, with half a dozen other terrible reprobates, to be conveyed from the county seat to the prison.

The stage was a regular one, but on this trip it was given up entirely to the prisoners and the officers in charge of them.

At noon the vehicle stopped at a country village for a change of horses and for dinner.

For better security the prisoners had been handcuffed two and two, with the exception of the odd one, whose limbs had been closely fettered.

A long chain united them all in one gang.

A little to the surprise of his guardians, Gordon Vorce called for as good a dinner as the principal tavern of the village could furnish.

The demand was accepted as a proof of his "toughness," but it was none the less granted.

His right hand being at liberty, he began eating the moment a well-filled plate was placed before him.

"Well, if you can take things as cool as that, with your twenty years," observed his immediate partner, in admiring surprise, "I certainly ought to make no complaints!"

"Nor I," said another of the prisoners. "Let's all follow the example. It's sense, after all. Let's have another square meal all around. It's the last we shall get for a long time to come!"

No objection was made to this proposition by the officers, and the prisoners were soon busy with their dinners.

As a simple matter of precaution, no knives were allowed them.

Gordon Vorce was the first to finish.

The entire party sat at a long table which had been placed out of doors in the shadow of the tavern.

The eyes of the three officers, as a matter of theory, were constantly upon the prisoners, but as a matter of fact, their watch was more or less distracted, they themselves being busy with their dinners and having a great deal to say to each other.

His plate emptied, Gordon Vorce turned to the man to whom he was handcuffed, and whispered:

"I have tried to draw my hand out of these irons, but my thumb won't admit of it!"

"Same here," was the reply. "There are men whose wrists are so large, or whose thumbs are so small, that they can slip a pair of handcuffs like nothing, but you and I are not that kind!"

"No," assented Vorce. "We've settled that point by trying!"

"And such being the fact—"

"Yes, you'll have to go on to the prison," whispered Vorce hurriedly. "But five years is not such a long time, after all! You'll soon be out again! I wouldn't advise you to do anything desperate!"

"I don't intend to!"

"But with me the case is different. With twenty years hanging over me, I'm no better than a dead man. All I can carry out of this coffin is clear gain, and I think I can carry all but the thumb of my left hand. That thumb will have to be left behind. Better to leave that behind me than sacrifice my whole body. I'm going to cut off my thumb!"

"But you have no knife," returned Gordon's "yoke-fellow," in a tone of horror.

"Yes, I have one. A case-knife I secured at breakfast. It's sharp as a razor. Just oblige me by looking the other way a few moments, but at the same time take hold of that thumb and pull stoutly!"

The man complied, but not without turning pale and trembling like a leaf.

Producing the knife he had secreted, Vorce drew it across the last joint of the thumb of his left hand, severing the muscles, forcing the blade into the socket of the member; and so taking off the whole thumb, with the quickness, if not with the ease and neatness, of a practical surgeon. Then he gave a quick, strong pull, drawing the mutilated hand out of the handcuffs, while the severed member dropped to the ground.

"Good-by, all!" was his farewell.

As rapid as the bounds of a deer were those taken by Gordon Vorce during the next few moments.

A fresh horse had just been brought out of the stable, and in an instant Vorce was upon the animal's back, flying at full speed for the nearest hills.

A number of shots were fired after him, as well from rifles as from revolvers, but none of them seemed to touch him.

At least they did not interfere with his departure.

The pursuit that succeeded was equally fruitless.

Long before night the news had circulated for many miles around that Gordon Vorce had sacrificed the thumb of his left hand for freedom and made good his escape.

Naturally his first thoughts—after getting clear of his pursuers and binding up his self-inflicted wound—were of his parents, who had stood by him, and made his misfortune their sorrow.

But there soon crept into his soul a most bitter and painful memory.

At the moment of his arrest he had been engaged to a beautiful girl, and the date had even been fixed for the wedding.

But his betrothed had been one of the first to believe him guilty, and had promptly withdrawn from association with him.

"Had she been different," was the reflection that came rushing over his soul, "she would now fly with me to some distant scene, and we could still be happy!"

Only his parents and a few friends were left him.

These would rejoice at his freedom, notwithstanding the awful price he had paid for it.

His first business was to see them, beginning with his parents.

No telegraph could head him off, no horse could overtake him.

The way was open for such a farewell visit, and then he would bury himself forever in the great woods or mountains.

He took his way homeward as rapidly as possible, changing his horse as often as was necessary, riding all night, and taking good care to travel by the loneliest routes, and to keep his face concealed from all observation.

In due course he arrived in the neighborhood in which he had lived so happily and so respected, but in which his name was now a by-word of scorn.

A dark night had fully set in at the moment when the escaped prisoner drew near the home from which he had been exiled forever.

He was struck by the air of solitude reigning around him.

Not a soul was stirring upon the roads, and hardly the gleam of a light was visible.

The heart of the fugitive quickened rapidly its throbbings.

The shadow which had fallen upon his own fortunes and destiny seemed to have extended itself over the whole vicinity to which he was returning.

In profound silence and vague expectancy of evil, he rode up to the rear of his late home, approaching from this direction for his better security.

How often he had traversed those paths!

What hopes had filled his breast when he last saw them!

Reaching a shed adjacent to the barn, he dismounted with the same silence and caution with which he had approached.

Not a footstep was heard.

No living form was visible.

The only sign of life was the faint gleam of a candle from the windows of the kitchen.

"That is something," he thought, with a strange flutter of his heart. "They are there!"

Throwing the reins of his bridle over a post, he moved hurriedly in the direction of that cheering gleam of light.

He was soon near enough to glance through one of the windows.

Not seeing any one, or even hearing the least sound, after listening a few moments, he slipped noiselessly up the steps to the door.

A slight touch upon the latch assured him that the door was unlocked, and he entered.

At the sound caused by these movements, an old woman who was seated in the kitchen arose agitatedly to her feet, turning a wan and excited face toward the intruder.

"Who are you?" she demanded, with evident alarm.

"It's me, Mrs. Meadows."

"Who, I say?"

At the raised voice and increased excitement of the good old woman, Gordon Vorce remembered that his features were still muffled from observation.

He realized, too, that no mystery respecting his identity could be so terrible to her as the open avowal of his presence.

"I am a friend of the family," he answered, in a disguised voice, after a pause. "Where is Mrs. Vorce?"

The woman raised her hands in astonishment, recoiling several steps in amazement.

"What! don't you know where Mrs. Vorce is?" she demanded.

"No. I have just arrived from a considerable journey. Mrs. Vorce is well, I hope?"

"Well! She is in her grave, man! She was buried yesterday!"

Gordon sunk into a chair, as a despairing groan escaped him.

"Didn't you know it, sir?" asked Mrs. Meadows, accepting the agitation of the new-comer as evidence of his sympathy for the family. "It was that affair of her son that killed her. She was never herself after Gordon was arrested. She knew, you see, that he was innocent, and it fretted her horribly to see that all the world believed him guilty!"

"She—she never doubted his innocence?" faltered Gordon.

"Never, sir! Her last words were a protestation of his innocence! She died of a broken heart—all because of the terrible wrong done her poor boy!"

Irrepressible sobs broke from the lips of the wronged man.

His frame shook as if in convulsions.

"And—and her husband?" he soon questioned.

"Where is Mr. Vorce?"

"He died this morning! His body is laid out in the parlor!"

"Dead? My father dead?"

The words escaped the lips of Gordon Vorce in a terrible cry.

It was not till Mrs. Meadows sunk half-fainting into a chair that he realized the betrayal of his identity to her.

"Is it you, Gordon?" she asked.

Gordon struggled with himself, mastering his emotion by an effort as terrible as his destiny.

"Yes, it's Gordon, Mrs. Meadows," he answered.

"But how—"

The good woman's astonishment was too great for expression.

"I've escaped—that's all," explained Gordon, with forced calmness.

Mrs. Meadows looked at him in silence, as if her soul were frozen.

She had been a life-long friend to the family.

Many an hour of his young days had Gordon passed upon her knees.

She, too, had never for a moment doubted his innocence.

What a situation for the good woman!

"Let me see my father, Mrs. Meadows," said Gordon, after a long silence.

Taking the flickering candle, Mrs. Meadows led the way to the adjoining parlor and uncovered the still, white face.

"He, too, died of a broken heart," murmured the kindly soul, averting her gaze. "The doctor said so!"

Gordon could not speak.

His tears of agony rained upon the pallid face before him.

"The funeral is to take place to-morrow," added Mrs. Meadows. "Can you be here?"

"Probably not. I do not know what moment the pursuers may arrive. Perhaps to-night, but doubtless early in the morning. I cannot allow them to afflict the souls of my dead mother and father by capturing me and taking me to prison. How about the funeral expenses? After all that has been spent in vain to clear me, will there be money enough to pay all just claims against the family?"

"Ample, Gordon—ample! If not, I shall gladly make up the difference!"

"Then I have no further concerns here, Mrs. Meadows. I leave all to you. I am going away never to return. My sentence was for twenty years, you will remember, and I could not reconcile myself to it. You will hear in due course that I cut myself clear of their handcuffs and chains. You believe in a heaven, as you have so often taught me—in that heaven to which my father and mother have gone! I will endeavor to meet you there, Mrs. Meadows!"

Pressing a farewell kiss upon the dead face before him, he wrung the hand of Mrs. Meadows, and fled precipitately from the house.

A few moments thereafter he was again mounted, and riding away at random.

For a long time he took no note of anything around him.

His chin rested upon his breast, and his eyes stared into empty space, without any sign of thought or perception.

Suddenly he started, rousing himself as if a servant had bitten him.

His eyes had encountered a brilliant gleam of light from the windows of a large farm-house he was approaching.

In front of this farm-house were numerous horses and carriages.

Various persons were moving about the premises, on the steps and the drives.

The first impulse of Gordon Vorce was to rein his horse about and fly at full gallop.

His second—which he acted upon—was to ride nearer.

Soon he was near enough to one of the men in the door-yard to address him.

"What's going on here?" he demanded, in the same hoarse voice he had first used in speaking to Mrs. Meadows.

"Going on here?" echoed the man, in astonishment. "Where did you come from, stranger, that you should ask such a question? Miss Thurston has married her gallant captain!"

Gordon Vorce reeled in his saddle.

Miss Thurston had been his betrothed at the commencement of his trouble. Now she was the bride of another!

How little cared she for the tragedy which had wrecked his whole existence!

CHAPTER XXIII.

AN AWFUL SITUATION.

RESUMING progress in dazed silence, Gordon rode away as if his pursuers were already at his heels.

His horse was panting for breath and covered with foam before he became conscious of what he was doing.

"He's had too much work already," he then mused. "I must halt for the night. But where, and with whom?"

He scanned the neighborhood around him, reflecting profoundly.

"I can't recall a soul hereabouts who has said a good word for me," he thought. "Let's see, a couple of miles will bring me to Judge Walker's. I hardly think he's home from his circuit. Every foot of the place is known to me. I can creep into some shed until morning."

Having reached this conclusion he rode slowly forward.

It was getting late when he reached his destination.

"Of course they're all abed and asleep," he said to himself, as he scanned the dark and silent dwelling. "So much the better! I'll put the horse under the shed, and pass the night in the straw-stack near him."

He disposed of himself and the horse in accordance with this purpose.

The straw-stack he had mentioned was an unusually large one, flat on the top, and so high that it would not be easy to see the intruder when he had once lain down upon it.

Effecting an entrance into the barn, Gordon secured hay and oats to feed his horse later.

Then he gained the top of the stack.

Strangely enough, the fugitive had not been in this position five minutes when a man on a fleet horse came dashing into the yard and dismounted.

Gordon Vorce gazed with startled intensity.

He knew not why he was so interested in the stranger, nor why all his thoughts at that moment were of the "black horseman."

Probably the stealthy movements of the newcomer had something to do with these suggestions.

"Suppose he should be that man!"

The thought almost choked Gordon Vorce.

If the horse had been a black, instead of a

white, Gordon would not have hesitated to feel that he was in the presence of the man for whose crime he had been so terribly punished.

How he watched and listened!

Throwing his reins over a post, the unknown hastened toward the house as noiselessly as possible.

Gordon Vorce slid from the straw-stack and followed him, taking care not to reveal his presence.

At the rear door of the house the unknown knocked cautiously for admittance.

"Who's there?" called a voice from within.

"It's I," was the answer.

The grinding of a lock and bolt were heard, and the door was opened.

"Come in," pursued the voice.

"No, father! I haven't the time."

The new-comer sat down on the door-step, with a nervous and thoughtful air.

Gordon caught a view of the interior, as he crept near under cover of some friendly bushes. It was lighted dimly by a candle.

An old man had been walking to and fro there in his stocking-feet, with a face as white as death.

This man was Judge Walker—the judge who had so lately sentenced Gordon to twenty years' imprisonment.

"You—you are surprised to see me here, I suppose," resumed the son.

"No, Albert," returned the judge, advancing to his side, and leaning against the door-post.

"I suppose you are in trouble. Your face tells me so. Certainly, you wouldn't be here at this hour on your wedding-night if everything was as it should be! You've heard the news, of course!"

"News? What news?"

"Why, that Gordon Vorce has escaped!"

"You don't mean it!"

"The news has been telegraphed all up and down the valley, and especially to me!"

"But how escaped?"

The judge briefly gave the particulars, as they are known to the reader, and added:

"Then you had not heard of this? You're here for some other reason?"

"Yes, father! There's an awful row going on at Thurston's!"

"What sort of a row?"

"There was a man there who recognized me as the 'black horseman!' There's not a moment to lose! They're after me! I must have a fresh horse, or they'll have me!"

"Unfortunately I've none to give you," returned the judge, with forced calmness. "I've only just arrived from the Circuit!"

The son looked terribly annoyed.

"You must find me something, father, or I shall be captured," he said, with savage sternness, "and if I am captured I'll squeal and disgrace you forever! I will avow that I am the author of all those crimes including the murder which has been so fatal to the Vorce family. I will swear that you knew of Gordon's innocence! I will swear that you knowingly sacrificed Gordon to save our own reputation!"

"Well, do so," replied the judge. "I will not deny it! As well die now as later! I am tired of all these terrors and horrors. The death of Mr. Vorce, who was my schoolmate, has given me a shock from which I can never recover. Yes, avow your guilt, wretched assassin! To think that I should be the father of such a son! Yes, avow that you are the 'black horseman,' and that you are the murderer of the man for whose death Gordon Vorce is now a hunted fugitive."

The sentence was interrupted by a cry as of some ravening beast of prey!

"Heavens! what's that?" cried Albert Walker, springing to his feet.

Ere any answer could be given, Gordon Vorce stood before the two men—deathly pale, implacable, terrible!

"This for my father!" he cried, leveling a revolver at the son.

A report succeeded, and Albert Walker gave himself up for dead, so near was his assailant, but the ball from Gordon's weapon merely grazed his side.

The truth was, Gordon was not alone.

There had been others concealed in the bushes which had sheltered him—a number of men, and at their head the sheriff by whom Gordon had been arrested on the river-road, as related.

Why these?

Simply because of a suspicion on the part of the sheriff.

On hearing of Gordon's escape, he had said to himself that the first step of the fugitive would be to wreak a terrible revenge upon Judge Walker.

What, in good truth, was more likely?

"Let others look for him where they will," said the sagacious sheriff to himself, "I will look for him at the judges!"

In pursuance of this idea, he had placed himself on the watch.

Imagine, therefore, the emotions with which the sheriff and his associates had listened to the horrible revelations cropping out of the confidences of the father and son!

The son the real assassin!

The father an accessory after the fact!

It was the hand of the sheriff which struck aside Gordon's weapon sufficiently to save the life of Albert Walker.

What the sheriff wanted to do, naturally enough, was to bring the young assassin to justice, and at the same time spare the innocent victim from taking the law into his own hands.

Pity the result did not respond to this intention.

Instead, the interference of the sheriff led to the criminal's escape.

Realizing that the ball had missed him, young Walker leaped backward into the house—instead of rushing the other way, in which the sheriff was so well prepared to receive him—and the next instant he had fled out of a back door, gaining such a start that it was possible for him to lose himself to all pursuit in the darkness.

The judge made no attempt to resist arrest, but three days later he was found dead in his cell at the county jail, and the verdict of the coroner's jury did not attempt to decide whether his death was owing to grief and shame, or to poison.

As to Gordon Vorce, he did not wait to receive the congratulations of the sheriff and others at the discovery of his innocence, or to take the usual steps to secure a "pardon" for a crime he did not commit, but hastened to pursue the fugitive assassin.

With what result, no one knew.

Neither he nor Albert Walker were ever seen again in the neighborhood which had been so fateful to them.

CHAPTER XXIV.

NICK FINDS HIS BEST PARD.

THE joy of Nick Peddie, as he gave himself up to the guidance of the friendly hand of his rescuer, can be imagined.

"Have no fear," whispered the unknown. "We shall have no difficulty in leaving the camp. I have the countersign for the night."

Nothing more was said until a sentry had been encountered and passed, and the couple were clear of the robbers.

"We shall soon reach the spot where I have left a couple of horses," then resumed the unknown. "How are you feeling, Mr. Peddie?"

"Rather sore in body and not a little worried in mind," answered Nick, who was greatly astonished to see that his name was known to his rescuer.

"I cannot cure the soreness," said the latter, "but I think I can dispose of the worry. You are fretting, no doubt, in regard to Mr. Hamlin, in view of the situation in which you left him?"

Nick assented, wondering more and more at the knowledge of his deliverer.

"Well, Mr. Hamlin is all right. I have taken him to a place of safe-keeping, and you'll soon have the pleasure of seeing him again."

At this moment was heard the alarm for which Nick had been listening from the very moment of his escape from the tent in which he had been confined.

"At last!" ejaculated his deliverer, still retreating rapidly from the scene of excitement behind him. "They've hardly been as prompt to detect your absence as I thought they would be, and to look for us now will be like looking for a needle in a haystack."

At the end of another minute the couple reached the horses in waiting.

"Are you strong enough, Mr. Peddie, to mount without my assistance?" asked the unknown. "If not—"

"Oh, I can readily manage it," replied Nick. "The mere thought of being free again makes me as strong as a giant."

He hastened to mount the horse he found at his disposal, and his rescuer, taking possession of the other, led the way still further from the robber camp.

"Remembering how weak you must be from your personations of Mazeppa and Captain Haskell," resumed the unknown, "I took the risk of bringing the horses pretty close to the camp. We'll walk them a minute or two, and then strike a jog."

"Somehow your voice seems familiar," observed Nick, scanning the figure ahead of him with new earnestness, now that it was outlined against the horizon with considerable clearness. "May I ask if you have ever talked with me before to-night?"

"Yes; yesterday afternoon."

"Ah! you are the good friend who loaned me a horse, as I had begun to suspect?"

His guide assented, such being indeed the case.

"Need I say how grateful I am for this release from that robber camp, sir? I would like to know the real name of the man to whom I am so much indebted. Will you give it to me?"

"Yes, in all confidence. It is Gordon Vorce."

"I thank you, Mr. Vorce—how much and how deeply, I am really at a loss to say," declared Nick. "What you have done for Mr. Hamlin, too, is just as gratifying to me as if the gentleman were my father or brother. I regret deeply that the splendid horse you kindly loaned me has been killed without any fault of mine—"

"That's all right, Mr. Peddie," interrupted

Vorce quietly. "We must all put up with the fortunes of war. Of course I have had special reasons for coming between Mr. Hamlin and his oppressors, and one of them is that I am the deadly enemy of the man who calls himself Captain Ready. That man has wrecked my life."

"You know who and what he is, then?"

"Yes. His real name is Albert Walker, and his father was no less a man than Judge Walker, of the Supreme Court of Nebraska. Let me give you a little idea of their history, which will also give you a glimpse of mine."

He proceeded to detail the tragic events we have just laid before the reader.

"And so you have at last got track of the 'black horseman,' Mr. Vorce?" queried Nick, after hearing those particulars. "He and Captain Ready are identical?"

"Yes. It seems that this heartless assassin came here not long after the events I have narrated, and in due course became the chief of the Red Ransomers!"

"And you, sir—you have at last tracked him here, and mean to get square with him before you leave this neighborhood?"

"Exactly."

Gordon Vorce looked back a few moments, inclining his ear, and then added:

"I think we can now ride faster without danger. Evidently there is clatter enough behind us to completely cover all the noise we're likely to cause."

The suggestion was duly acted upon, and a ride of several miles succeeded without further remark between the new friends.

"Here we are," suddenly said Vorce, drawing rein. "This is one of my retreats."

He hastened to dismount, and Nick followed his example.

"One of your retreats, eh?" he repeated, with a comprehensive glance around. "Well, I should say as much! As near as I can see in this darkness, we must be near the jumping-off place, or at the fag end of creation."

"Rough, is it?"

"Like the den of a grizzly! It's safe to say that you are not disturbed here by neighbors."

"Never; and that is why it is one of my favorite haunts."

He hitched the horses to a couple of trees, and then led the way toward a small log-but of which Nick was just able to make out the outlines, in the midst of a rocky elevation a few rods distant.

"Shall we be safe here till morning, Mr. Vorce?" asked Nick, as he followed his deliverer.

"Till morning, or till next year—just as you like," answered Vorce. "Not necessarily in this hut, which has often been visited by soldiers, robbers and others, but somewhere near it, in caves, lava-beds or other hiding-places."

Striking a match at the entrance of the hut, Vorce took his way into it, and lighted a candle he had left conveniently near the entrance on a table.

"Come in, Mr. Peddie," he invited, as the beams of the candle began to illuminate a small, square apartment, beyond which was a second one. "If you are as tired as I am, you will be glad to sit down."

He indicated a rustic chair, and Nick dropped into it with a sigh of relief.

In the silence that succeeded, a sound of heavy breathing reached Nick's hearing from the inner apartment, and he started violently, turning an inquiring glance in that direction and then upon his rescuer, who smiled contentedly.

"Of course you can guess who it is, without the least chance of error," he said.

"Mr. Hamlin?"

Vorce assented.

"I found him at the butte where you left him," he explained, "and not an instant too soon. If I had not taken charge of him as I did, he would have been in the hands of the robbers an hour later, as two or three different search-parties had taken the butte for a rendezvous. How weak he was and is! What a terrible captivity he has been enduring!"

Nick stepped to the door of communication, glancing at the sleeper with a look of the keenest interest and pity.

"How did he seem when you left him?"

"In every way right, as near as a man can be, after such a terrible experience, but so very, very anxious for your return. He wants you to bear him company, and in that case intends to start immediately for his home on the Missouri."

A brief conversation succeeded, and then Gordon Vorce made up a rude bed on a rustic lounge at one side of the apartment, remarking:

"As we shall have a great deal to do to-morrow, Mr. Peddie, and as you are evidently as weak as a child, I think the sooner you lie down here and get to sleep the better."

"And you, sir?"

"I'll sleep later, after arranging such a network of strings in all the paths by which the house is reached that no one can intrude without giving us fair warning."

Nick had some doubts as to the wisdom of giving himself up to slumber, but he had scarcely extended his weary frame upon the couch placed at his disposal when nature overcame him. It

is doubtful if he could have remained awake an hour if his very life had been at stake. The balance of the night passed to him as a single brief blank.

His first thought on awakening was of Mr. Hamlin, who was still sleeping soundly.

Then he looked around in search of Vorce, whom he found in the act of caring for the horses at a little shed upon a second elevation at no great distance from the first.

A few remarks were exchanged, and then Nick gave his attention to a number of the features of the landscape, including a brook he remembered crossing the preceding evening.

"Well, this is odd!" he muttered, with a start as if he had suddenly conceived a keen interest in his surroundings.

He drew from an inner pocket the manuscript map to which reference has been made, and examined it hastily.

"Yes, there's the opening," he muttered. "Yonder is the spur of the ledge. Here is the garden—"

He gave such a start now that Vorce drew near to take cognizance of the cause of his evident excitement.

"Is not this the Myers Ranch?" asked Nick.

"Yes. The house was originally built by a Myers—who was killed by the Indians."

"And the place was afterward sold to a Mr. Thompson?" pursued Nick, still reading from a memorandum in one corner of his map.

"It was. Mr. Thompson was also killed by the Indians."

"And the heirs have sold the place to an eastern land-agent?"

"Such is the fact."

"And this is my famous farm," cried Nick, as he returned his map to his pocket. "So much for buying a pig in a poke! This is the renowned Dead Man's Ranch!"

"I could have told you as much yesterday," acknowledged Vorce, smilingly, "only it was my intention to get here ahead of you, and give you a surprise. When Mr. Hamlin puts in an appearance, we'll have a cup of coffee and something to eat, and I shall then take pleasure in showing you over your new acquisition."

Nick was about to reply, when light and rapid footsteps fell upon his hearing, and he turned, to find himself face to face with Mabel Barter, of the Rolling Tavern.

CHAPTER XXV.

NICK AND MABEL.

THE hollow smile Mabel had called to her face did not conceal her painful agitation.

She was visibly distressed with her unrequited passion for Nick Peddie, and especially with remorse for the murderous falsehood of which she had been guilty.

"I suppose you're surprised to see me, Mr. Peddie, after what has passed?" she simpered, as she came to a halt near him.

"No, I can't say that I am," was Nick's answer. "A man who has had any considerable dealings with his fellow-beings can hardly be surprised at anything they may do—unless they should do something sensible!"

"How freezing you are!"

"Ought I really to regard your visit as a bit of heavenly bliss?" demanded Nick, sternly. "What's up? What has started you in this direction? Has a raid been made on the Rolling Tavern? Has your father and mother been arrested for their numerous murders?"

"Hush! You frighten me to death! What if some one should hear you?"

She bent a quick and scared glance upon Mr. Vorce, who had been quick to beat a retreat at her arrival, and was now giving his attention to the horses.

"If you don't wish to hear unwelcome observations," returned Nick, "you had better refrain from all intrusions of this nature. I'm sure that I don't owe you for anything—not even good will. These premises are mine. Perhaps the man who originally squatted here was a madman or an idiot, and it may be that I'm as mad or foolish as he was, but my title is nevertheless perfect. You will oblige me greatly by taking an instant departure."

The intruder began to cry—partly for effect, partly with actual vexation.

"I come to say that I am very sorry for my wickedness of last night," she declared hurriedly. "I am here to ask your forgiveness."

"I forgive you freely and fully," replied Nick, "but only on condition that you vanish immediately and that you do not come within ten miles of me hereafter. Anything else to say?"

"Yes, several things that concern you deeply—"

"Excuse me, I must sit down," interrupted Nick, pushing into the house precipitately. "You seem to forget that I have barely emerged alive from the tight place into which you thrust me!"

He dropped into a rude chair, motioning her to another, and added:

"Out with it, and be brief!"

"I want, first of all, to warn you against the mysterious man I find here with you—"

"Well, you can save your powder. Your 'mysterious man' is no mystery to me. I know

just who he is and what is the secret of his presence in this neighborhood. I may even add that he has rendered me services of the greatest importance, and that I have no desire to hear from you any cackle to his detriment, or I may forget the respect due your sex, and bundle you out of doors with scant ceremony."

"But there is something wrong about him!"

"Even if there is, it is not for you to accuse him. He is not keeping a death-trap to catch unwary travelers. He has not fled his former residence—as you have!"

Mabel now began crying entirely in earnest. She realized that there was a gulf between her and Nick which could never be crossed.

It is unnecessary to say that he was not at all impressed by her tears.

"How cruel you are!" she resumed. "Will you never be anything to me again—not even a friend?"

"Not if I know it," returned Nick scornfully. "I have no wish to reckon among my friends any person of your character. But why pursue an interview so disagreeable to us both? It will be only right and decent to keep out of my sight henceforth."

The guilty woman sobbed a few moments in uncontrollable grief.

"Enough!" exclaimed Nick impatiently. "Will you rid me of your presence?"

He made a gesture so full of command and entreaty that she could not ignore it.

"Oh, very well," she snapped, as she suddenly dried her tears and arose. "If you don't want my company, there are others who do."

"Allow me to see you off," was all the notice taken of her observations. "I suppose your horse is in the ravine under the pines?"

Receiving a nod of assent, he led the way in the direction indicated.

The young woman was soon in her saddle.

"Good-by, Mr. Peddie," she said. "I doubt if we ever meet again. We're both going to certain destruction."

"Well, even that—anything," returned Nick, with smiling scorn. "I can endure anything except your presence."

Nick intended to put the case strongly.

He wanted this leave-taking to be final.

The girl turned frightfully pale.

"All is over," she gasped. "It matters nothing now what becomes of me."

She rode away, plying her whip savagely, and was soon going over the uneven ground at such a furious pace that Nick expected her to get a fall that would kill her.

CHAPTER XXVI.

IN DEADLY PERIL.

A HAND suddenly touched Nick on the arm—that of his deliverer.

"Let's see where she goes," he proposed.

Nick followed his new friend, and was soon at the top of one of the highest hills in the vicinity.

What a surprise there awaited him!

From this elevation he was able to look down into a number of small valleys, or bowl-like depressions, in the general level of the country.

The retreating figure of Mabel soon became distinctly visible, passing under trees that were sufficiently open to afford an almost continuous view of her.

"She really seems to be going away," exclaimed Nick. "I am delighted."

"Just look again," said Vorce. "She's turning off into the open."

Nick started violently, as he looked in the direction indicated.

"Ah! do you see that?" he cried. "A hundred red-skins, who are evidently on the war-path!"

It was even so.

In the edges of an open space, at the extreme bottom of one of the depressions we have mentioned, had assembled a compact body of Crows, armed, eager and watchful, as if expecting an important arrival.

At their head was Sword Bearer, in all his paints and feathers, and beside him, in like garb, were his medicine-men and leading warriors—all presenting a picture whose significance could not have possibly been mistaken.

"See!" pursued Nick. "That woman sees them! The chief rides forward to meet her!"

Vorce could hardly believe the evidence of his senses, as he saw the white girl ride up to the herculean savage in command of the red-skins, and shake hands with him.

"Oh that's nothing," muttered Nick, in response to an ejaculation of amazement that came from his companion. "The couple are about agreed on a matrimonial union! Sword Bearer has become thoroughly infatuated with the hideous creature, and has offered her an immense fortune to become the head of his household."

"And she is inclined to accept?"

"She is at least inclined, I think, to carry the matter far enough to get hold of the cash offered her."

"But has Sword Bearer the cash to give her?"

"Oh, any quantity of it, no doubt. His predecessor, you'll remember, was one of the most violent and successful marauders who has ever

cursed the Rockies. He is known to have maintained detectives at each end of the transcontinental route to post him as to all movements of persons and remittances, and it is said that he has more than once scooped a million in a single haul. Sword Bearer is now in possession of these funds, and doubtless has a financial strength that many a leading millionaire of the country would be glad to possess."

"And he's ready to waste his cash upon such a creature as that!"

"Oh, nothing is more natural. About the only thing he and his braves want money for is to buy whisky. As you know, the whole band is supported by the Government, and they pick up furs and other valuables in such quantity as to help themselves supplied in current cash, so that they have no real occasion to fall back on the old chief's accumulations."

"But, see! Mr. Peddie!" exclaimed Mr. Vorce excitedly. "The couple are, evidently talking of you! See how earnestly they are looking in this direction. The girl is pointing out something. I should say the girl is making a bargain with the chief to kill you! They shake hands upon it!"

Nick shared these views entirely.

"They think we're tired—helpless," added Vorce. "Now they are pointing away to the eastward, in the direction of Haskell and his men, as much as to say that they cannot come to our assistance in time to save us. See! Sword Bearer makes a gesture to his men, and they all leap into their saddles. Doubtless they'll soon be in motion in this direction."

"Quick!" cried Nick, turning away. "We must arouse Mr. Hamlin and take leave of the Dead Man's Ranch in a hurry. We haven't a moment to lose. We're in deadly peril!"

Another glance, and the fact was confirmed.

Sword Bearer and his men were in motion!

CHAPTER XXVII.

CAPTAIN READY AND ALICE.

CAPTAIN READY, in his pretended character of Mr. "Hobart," had taken but a few steps at the head of the little cavalcade presented by Alice Hamlin and her friends, when he came to the spot where he had left his horse, which was one of the very best to be had.

As he mounted, he caught a full view of Mr. Britton, the old cavalryman who had been serving Alice as guide, and a very peculiar expression passed over his features.

"Yes, I know that chap," he said to himself, "and he'd know me, if he could once get a good view of my figure-head. I must take care not to get too near him, and to keep my face turned in the opposite direction!"

This was easily done.

As fate would have it, Mr. Britton had fallen into an interesting conversation with Mr. Dayton—to which the two young men of the party were listening eagerly—and were also bringing up the rear, so that no opportunity was afforded him or them to get a view of the features of the supposed rancher.

On the right of Captain Ready rode Mrs. Dayton, who was an excellent horsewoman, notwithstanding her somewhat ample proportions, and on the left rode Alice, both of the ladies keeping near their new guide and leader.

Wary, watchful, and resolute, the chief of the Red Ransomers kept up such a conversation with the couple, and especially with Alice, that they did not have time to become suspicious, or to reflect upon one or two singularities of the whole proceeding which had struck them.

As to the effect of the presence of Alice Hamlin upon the robber-chief, we need only say that he had experienced at sight of her the first real passion of his entire existence.

He had never before been so charmed—so delighted.

And to think that she was entirely at his mercy, and that he was taking her where he would—what a delight for the lawless ruffian.

He was so intensely overjoyed that he had no little difficulty in preventing his jubilation from invading his features, and even his speech and manner, and so leading to his detection.

"Are you a man of family, Mr. Hobart?" asked Mrs. Dayton, during one of the short pauses in the conversation.

"Certainly, madam," and he smiled in his most engaging fashion. "I may even say," he added, as he thought of his eighty followers—"that my family is a very large one."

"And you dare to live in this wilderness with them?" pursued the lady.

"Oh, yes, why not?"

"I should think you'd be afraid of the Indians!"

"They're not dangerous, fortunately," declared the captain. "None of the red-skins in this neighborhood are hostile. The one who is the most dangerous, as well as the most powerful, is Sword Bearer, and he and I are on the best of terms."

At this avowal, the ladies turned quick and almost startled glances upon him.

The remark was indeed a sort of slip on the part of the speaker.

He noticed the effect of the avowal, and hastened to add:

"I merely mean that I am too well protected

by the Government for even a hostile to dare molest me."

"But the Red Ransomers, Mr. Hobart!" pursued Mrs. Dayton. "Are they not very near us, or at least somewhere in this neighborhood?"

"To be candid, madam," answered the pretended rancher, "they're nearer to you at this moment than you would consider pleasant."

"And you're not afraid of them?"

"Not in the least."

"And that terrible Captain Ready—are you not afraid of him?"

"Of course not!"

"That only shows how used to danger you men are!" commented the good lady. "For my part, I should be scared to death if I were to find myself in the presence of that man."

"Oh, you might not," assured the captain, smilingly. "Everybody agrees that he's a very pleasant and agreeable fellow when he chooses to be so."

"It can't be possible!"

"It's only too true, I fear. You wouldn't be a bit more afraid of him than you are of me."

A brief silence succeeded.

"I keep thinking, Mr. Hobart," then said Alice, "that we may make you a great deal of trouble, there are so many of us. Is your house a large one?"

"Yes, particularly so for this quarter of the world," was the answer. "As we are now clear of the woods, suppose we ride at a quiet gallop? We shall get there all the sooner, and have more time in which to make ourselves comfortable for the night."

The suggestion was duly acted upon, and little more was said until two or three miles had been left behind the little cavalcade.

"Are we not almost there?" asked Alice, as Captain Ready set the example of coming to a walk.

"Almost!"

"I see lights!" suddenly cried Mrs. Dayton.

"And a camp-fire!" added Alice.

"Yes, those are my cowboys," declared the pretended rancher. "If you have no objections I'll let them know that I am at the head of this party, and so relieve them of all fear of Red Ransomers and Indians, if our arrival should cause them any."

He drew a whistle from his pocket and blew three peculiar blasts, and then led the way through a narrow fringe of trees into an open space of considerable dimensions.

"Here we are," he exclaimed, with an intonation of profound satisfaction, as he leaped lightly to the ground, and gave the ladies due assistance. "This is my house."

The villain had carried his point.

Alice and her friends were now in the camp of the Red Ransomers.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE PLANS OF MR. HAMLIN.

As Nick and Vorce reached the house, they found Mr. Hamlin just in the act of emerging from it.

The situation of affairs was explained to him in few words, and both he and Nick, as strangers in the neighborhood, looked to Vorce for his advice as to the best course of action open to them.

"Of course we could hide on this very ranch, as I have suggested, so that the enemy would not find us very soon, if ever," Vorce hastened to say, in response to that mute appeal. "But a better, because safer, way, will be for us to take refuge in Captain Haskell's camp."

The trio were promptly in motion, getting clear of the ranch several minutes before Mabel and Sword Bearer reached it.

"Of course we must leave you to take the lead, Mr. Vorce," said Nick, with a sigh of relief on Hamlin's account, as soon as he saw that they were getting away unseen. "You know just where Haskell is encamped."

"Yes, and how to reach him without being seen by the enemy," returned Vorce. "As they descend toward the ranch on one side of the ridge, we'll gain Haskell's on the other."

This programme was duly carried out, and in the course of three-quarters of an hour the trio drew near their destination.

They were seen, of course, and Nick was recognized from a considerable distance.

As they approached one of the sentries on the side of the camp nearest them, Captain Haskell himself was seen hastening to meet them, as the central figure of a considerable group of his men who were off duty at the moment.

The cordial manner in which the captain received Nick was quite enough to put him quite at his ease and make him oblivious of all he had suffered through the mistake of being mistaken for Captain Ready.

"I need not say how pleased I am, Mr. Peddie, to see you looking so well," greeted Haskell, shaking hands warmly with him. "The same to you, Mr. Vorce."

Even as the captain uttered these words, his whole attention concentrated upon Mr. Hamlin, whose very aspect was suggestive of his identity.

"I see, captain, that you already have some suspicion of the name of the gentleman I am now to have the pleasure of presenting to you

in person," said Nick, joyfully. "A strange hazard has accomplished all your zeal and devotion failed to do!"

"What! You mean that this gentleman is Roger Hamlin?"

"Such is indeed the fact."

It is needless to say how very cordial were the greetings exchanged by the two gentlemen, Mr. Hamlin having been duly enlightened by Nick as to all the captain's zeal in his behalf.

"You have been looking for me, then, and trying to effect my deliverance?" queried Hamlin, when the couple had exchanged the conventional greetings of the occasion.

Haskell assented.

"Perhaps you have seen my messenger?"

The captain shook his head.

"Then how did you learn of my presence in the camp of the robbers?"

"Through one of my men, who passed several days as a spy in their midst."

"And you haven't seen either my messenger or the letter I intrusted to him?"

"No, sir, nothing of the sort. All I know of your affairs has been told me by my spy, and it is upon his report that all my steps in this affair have been taken."

The escaped prisoner heaved a sigh of the profoundest regret.

What must be the anguish of his poor wife at that moment!

What must be the grief of Alice!

"And now what service can I render you, Mr. Hamlin?" pursued Haskell. "If I am not mistaken in the situation, you are anxious to communicate with your family at the earliest possible moment?"

"Oh, yes—yes!"

"Then suppose we fall in immediately and start for the Union Pacific?"

"The very thing."

The order was accordingly given.

Then the rescued prisoner drew the arm of Captain Haskell within his own, and walked away a short distance with him, so that no one might hear further what he had to say.

"Captain Haskell," said he, in a mere whisper, "did you ever hear the circumstances under which I was captured by the robbers?"

"Only vaguely," was the answer; "but I have been told that you managed to prevent the Red Ransomers from getting hold of your money."

"Yes, I had that good luck, simply because I got warning that the train was to be held up at a certain point. After taking the advice of the officials of the train, I came to a halt, and paused long enough in a lonely spot, to bury my treasure, with the aid that was afforded me by the conductor and others. I even had hopes of making my escape, but the robbers had foreseen by our very delay what we were doing, and I had not gone ten rods from my cache when I was captured."

Captain Haskell looked disturbed by the declaration.

"In that case, may not the robbers have found your cache and dug up your money?" he asked.

"I feared so for a long time, but without cause," answered Hamlin. "Since I have been here, I have learned in various ways that these villains failed to find where the money was hidden."

"Well, your first act must be, then, to recover this buried money?"

"Naturally. I would like to go as directly and quickly as possible to the spot where it is buried."

"Quite right, sir. Need I add that my men and I are wholly at your disposal, and that we will do all we can to hasten your restoration to your family, and assist you in the recovery of your money?"

Expressing his thanks, Hamlin led the way back to Nick, to whom he stated briefly the conclusions to which he had come.

"And now, Mr. Peddie," he added, "what are your intentions? Will you go East with me, or are you inclined to remain at the Dead Man's Ranch?"

Nick made a gesture of irrepressible disgust.

"I am going with you, Mr. Hamlin, if you have no objections," he declared. "My dream of a fine stock ranch, where I could raise horses and cattle, is now a thing of the past. Naturally enough after all the difficulties which have presented themselves to me since my advent into this region, I have concluded that I have no call to be a rancher!"

"Good," commented Hamlin. "I shall have the pleasure of your company on this long ride!"

The couple were soon in motion.

"Ah! if they could have known that they were going directly away from Alice, and that she was in the hands of Captain Ready."

CHAPTER XXIX.

A WOMAN'S WILES.

THE disappointment of Sword Bearer and Mabel at the escape of their intended victims was intense.

"They're certainly at no great distance," declared the scheming girl, after a rapid survey of the Dead Man's Ranch, including the dwell-

ing which had so recently been vacated. "But where?"

"The question is easier asked than answered," replied Sword Bearer. "There are places within half a mile of us which offer every desired chance of concealment. I do not refer merely to the caves and other retreats with which I am familiar, but to those of which I am ignorant. If we had hounds, we could track the runaways, but it will do little good for even our best scouts to waste their time in that direction. Nevertheless, I'll try."

He summoned a number of his most capable braves, including those who were especially familiar with the neighborhood, and set them to work, giving them all the assistance possible.

In vain, however.

The half-hour devoted to this business was a half-hour wasted.

"Then what are we to do?" was Mabel's inquiry, after the chief had made due report of the non-success of his scouts.

"There's only one thing we can do," replied Sword Bearer, "and that is to watch the soldiers of Captain Haskell, and see what action they take in the course of the next few hours. If the fugitives are there, the captain and his men will soon get in motion for the Union Pacific."

"Why so?"

"Because Hamlin was captured in that quarter."

"But why should he go back there?"

"Simply because he has buried a great pile of money near that railway."

"At the time of his capture, you mean? But why didn't the Red Ransomers find it?"

"Because the road had just been newly ballasted thereabouts for several miles, and consequently the spot where the money was buried had nothing to distinguish it from miles of similar excavations in both directions from the scene of Mr. Hamlin's capture!"

Mabel smiled a little cynically.

"You seem to be very well posted about the affair," she said.

"Well, I ought to be," was the reply. "I spent weeks there, with scores of men, in the attempt to get track of that million or two, but all in vain."

The girl reflected.

"If Hamlin and his crowd should start in that direction, as you think they will, would it not be well to follow them?"

"Certainly. That is my intention."

"If they dig up that money, you ought to be able to lay hands upon it!"

"If I don't," returned Sword Bearer, "I shall come to the conclusion that I am losing my grip. Considering the importance of this matter, I had better dispatch a couple of scouts to keep an eye on Haskell, and report the first sign of a movement."

He hastened to do so.

"And now, Star Eyes," resumed Sword Bearer, with a return of the sentimentality which had become almost chronic with him, "let us come back to our own affairs. You have had a long night to sleep and dream since I showed you that million. Has my pleading all been in vain?"

"Oh, I did not say that," returned Mabel, with an affectation of timidity which she had found to be very effective in her dealings with the cultured savage.

"Then do you mean to imply that you consent to become mine?"

"The temptation is certainly great. Think of a whole million!"

"It shall be yours if you will marry me," assured Sword Bearer, as his rugged features flushed with eagerness and hope.

"But how mine? In what way will you place the money in my hands?"

The wily chief hesitated a moment about his reply.

Notwithstanding all his infatuation for the girl—an infatuation which had been provoked by a line of conduct which was at least questionable—he was not so foolish as to be ignorant of the fact that she seemed to think a great deal more of the money he had promised her than she did of him.

This he didn't exactly like.

He would have been glad to be loved for himself.

Nevertheless he had no intention of making the actual situation of affairs a cause of quarrel.

With a long-drawn sigh he answered:

"I will place the money in your hands in any way you please. Here, or at the Rolling Tavern, or at any place you choose to name."

"Thank you, great chief."

She leaned toward him from her saddle, laying her head against his breast, and he did not fail to avail himself of the opportunity thus afforded him of bestowing one of his hearty kisses upon her forehead.

"Now I know that you love me, great chief," resumed the girl, in her most wheedling voice, "and I can do no less than respond to your suit favorably. My heart has pleaded for you."

"Then you will be mine?"

"It is agreed. If you send the bridal present you have promised me to the Rolling Tavern in

the course of the day, I will become yours tomorrow!"

For once Sword Bearer was too delighted to speak English, bursting forth in a perfect torrent of ejaculations in his mother-tongue.

Then he forced himself to be calm, and repeated his ardent thanks in such a way that Mabel could take them in by hearing as well as sight.

"As to the million," he added, with as easy grace as if he were speaking of a mere bagatelle, "I will say only a few words. You will find this bridal gift in your little room at the Rolling Tavern whenever you choose to go home!"

He turned to his chief medicine-man and another of his favorites, giving them an order in their native tongue, and they inclined themselves and hurried away in the direction of the camp of their people.

The glance with which Mabel looked after them was full of greed and anxiety, as well as satisfaction.

Why should she care for Nick Peddie?

Of what account was he in comparison with a million dollars?

A strange gleam came into her averted eyes—the gleam of a person who is ready to dare and do all!

"Of course you would have killed that Nick Peddie for me, as we talked, if we had got hold of him?" she murmured.

"Of course," he nodded.

"But since he has escaped us, great chief, let him go."

Another assent.

"The fact is, we have things of more importance to think about!" pursued Mabel, as the gleam in her averted eyes grew deeper and deeper.

Once more Sword Bearer assented.

"Such being the situation of affairs," concluded the girl, as she brought her glances back to the face of the chief in all their treacherous hypocrisy, "I will go home to my father and mother, and tell them of my decision!"

The chief seemed to think this abrupt leaving-taking a little hard, but he was too stoical—or too hopeful—to complain of it.

"But I shall expect you either to-day or tomorrow by the middle of the afternoon, or sooner," added Mabel, greatly to the delight of her ardent wooer. "You will not fail?"

"Certainly not!"

The assurance called a flush of joy to the girl's face about which there was not the least trace of hypocrisy. For once she was sincere on wishing to see him!

"Of course I shall be pleased to take you to the tavern," he added.

Mabel shook her head.

"Or send an escort!"

"That, too, is unnecessary. None of the Red Ransomers will dare offend me, seeing that Captain Ready has so long been anxious to marry me!"

They separated upon this basis, Mabel deepening her hold upon the chief by embracing him earnestly—for the first time in all their acquaintance.

CHAPTER XXX.

MABEL'S PLOT.

As Sword Bearer had promised, the girl found, on her arrival at the Rolling Tavern, that she had been preceded by the two representatives of her wooer, and that a great box full of money had been duly deposited in her apartment.

To be sure, she had ridden home slowly, so as not to interfere in the remotest degree with this very vital and important proceeding.

She found her parents in a state of tremendous excitement, of course.

"Do you know what that too ardent admirer of yours has been doing, dear?" was the greeting with which the old woman met her daughter, as the latter alighted.

"Certainly," was the answer.

"He has literally filled your room with money!"

"That's the result of a little understanding to which Sword Bearer and I have come!"

The girl spoke with forced calmness.

The old woman looked shocked.

She even shuddered.

"You mean—a marriage!" faltered old Barter, who had taken the girl's horse by the bridle as a preliminary toward leading it away to the shed which was used as a stable.

"That's the talk," avowed Mabel, with a keen look around, to assure herself that no one save her parents was within hearing.

"But do you intend to go through the farce of an Injun marriage with him?" asked the mother, with a sort of dread and horror one could not conceal.

"Certainly not," answered Mabel, as a hard, cold look mantled her face.

"What then?"

"You shall soon hear."

She dropped into a chair upon the narrow veranda, and continued:

"The poor horses are all as sound as usual, I suppose?"

Old Barter nodded.

"And in excellent condition? Ready to go for their lives at any moment?"

A second nod.

"Then keep them so," enjoined Mabel, as her face grew still darker. "We shall soon have use for them."

The old woman sunk into a chair near her daughter's, with a nervousness she made no attempt to conceal.

"You know I'm not fond of riddles, Mabel," she declared. "I'd like to know just what you propose to do!"

"So that we can lend our aid," supplemented the old man.

"And make a success of the project," added the landlady.

"To all of which I assent," declared the daughter. "Listen, Sword Bearer will be here early in the afternoon, and the first thing I shall do after his arrival will be to mix up one of his favorite toddies, making it a little stronger than usual!"

"Or putting a drug into it that'll put him asleep in short order!" suggested the mother.

"Or else a dose of poison," whispered the old man, "that'll kill him before you can say Jack Robinson!"

"No—none of that," returned Mabel. "There is no occasion to take that course. It is a day of peculiar excitement for the fellow, and he will hardly keep the count of the toddies I press upon him, or even remark their strength. Within an hour after his arrival, he ought to be as senseless and powerless as a stone man from Egypt!"

"He will be, no doubt!" muttered Mrs. Barter, with a sigh of relief at the simplicity of the girl's plot for reaching the grand result of the occasion—the reduction of the too ardent wooer to silence and helplessness.

"And once he's in that state?" asked the old man, with a wicked leer.

"We'll dump him out upon the prairie," was the girl's answer, with the calmest mien and voice in the world.

"And go away?" queried Barter.

"And leave him behind us?" supplemented the old woman.

"We'll go away and leave him behind us," declared Mabel, who grew more and more unlovely with every word she uttered, and who had already grown to look like an incarnation of murder. "But before we go too far, we'll kindle a fire to the windward of the spot where he is lying, and so render his sleep one from which there will be no awakening!"

The old couple looked at her approvingly, but not without a certain tremor of horror, which caused them to look whiter and more ghastly than usual.

"Of course we must have that money," said Barter, after a pause. "How much is there in the whole pile?"

"He promised a million!"

"Well, I should say he has kept his promise," declared Mrs. Barter. "It made me almost scared to see it!"

"In other words, she became as white as any corpse you ever saw," remarked the husband and father. "We knew at once that you had formed some plan of becoming the possessor of every dollar of that money. But go on, dear. What is the object of the fire?"

"Simply, to make the death of the chief look like an accident. You see at a glance how easily a death of that sort can be explained. As is known to everybody who knows anything whatever about Sword Bearer, he often drinks himself into such a state that he don't know his head from a barrel of apple-sauce. While in that condition, he has dropped a spark of fire from his pipe and kindled a blaze around him, or one of his followers has produced such an accident at no great distance. In any case, the result we are seeking will be sure to arrive. The chief will be roasted or suffocated at the spot where we leave him, and we shall make our escape with the million!"

The assent and approval of the old couple to this scheme could not have been given more plainly than it was, although neither uttered a word.

"And now a serious word with both of you," resumed Mabel, lowering her voice to a whisper, as she bent another keen glance around in quest of intruders. "As Sword Bearer has been fool enough to place this money in our hands, we'd be simpletons of the most simple kind not to order our affairs in such a way as to live in comfort and elegance the rest of our days. What is the yearly interest on a million, father?"

"About seventy thousand dollars, if we reckon the rate of interest as in New York, or about a hundred thousand a year, if we estimate the interest at the legal rates of most of the Western States and Territories."

The girl looked her astonishment, as did her mother.

"Just think of it!" exclaimed the former. "A hundred thousand dollars a year is nearly two thousand dollars a week, or almost three hundred a day!"

The old couple not only comprehended her figures, but shared her amazement.

"Of course the Rolling Tavern, with the four horses hitched to it," resumed the girl, "will roll away at a fine pace before the fire to

which I have alluded, and we'll take care to keep it in motion until we have left all trace of Sword Bearer and his people behind us!"

The mother looked searchingly at her daughter, realizing that she had not yet fully expressed her ideas and intentions.

"And after that?" suggested the old man, who had been giving close attention to Mabel's every observation.

"We'll keep in motion," returned the fair plotter, "until we have left every trace of our past history behind us, even to our names. If you care to do so, we will cross the ocean and settle in England or Scotland."

"I would not care to do that," returned Mrs. Barter. "I should certainly feel like a fish out of water."

"For my part, I'd ask nothing better than to go back to the Adirondacks and build a house worthy of a prince in the center of a whole section of land, and keep all mankind at a distance. I wouldn't object in the least to go back to Iron-ton."

"What! where our name is in such bad odor?" exclaimed Mabel!

"Our names are not in such bad odor, I can assure you," returned Barter, "that the possession of a million of dollars would fail to make them shine like the stars in the heavens."

"But how could we explain the possession of all this money?" asked Mrs. Barter.

"We could say that we have discovered a remarkable mine of gold or silver in New Mexico," replied Barter. "Such discoveries have often been made, and who's to know to the contrary of such an explanation?"

"Sure enough, who?" murmured Mabel. "The explanation we are to give of the possession of this money is that we have struck it rich in New Mexico. But where are we to tell this tale? In other terms, where shall we live, what name shall we take, and so on? The sooner we settle all these particulars, the less likely we shall be to make any mistake."

"I agree to all this, of course," observed Barter. "Nevertheless, there is no necessity of coming to any final decision upon any of these matters past and present. There is a great deal yet to be accomplished before we are out of the Territory. We can leave all those questions to take care of themselves. The essential is that we take such action as is worthy of the possessors of a million. No more whisky peddling for me, even if it has paid a fair profit. Instead of selling our wines and brandies hereafter, we'll drink them. In a word, we'll shake off all our past, as Sindbad shook off the Old Man of the Sea, and enter upon a career of splendid independence."

The mother and daughter assented to this view of the situation, and the old man slipped away to the shed with Mabel's horse, and proceeded to give it the best of attention.

CHAPTER XXXI.

DROPPING THE MASK.

WE must now look after Alice Hamlin, whom we left at the moment of her arrival in the robber camp.

She and Mrs. Dayton had scarcely dismounted, as related, when a house they had noticed near them became illuminated as if by magic, and two or three men, who seemed to be servants, or members of the household of the pretended rancher, came hastily forth to meet the new arrivals.

"So, this is your home, is it?" queried Mrs. Dayton, with a countenance sufficiently indicative of wonder. "I had no expectation of seeing such a handsome abode in this remote wilderness."

"It is certainly the only house of the sort within many a long mile of us," returned Captain Ready, marking the astonishment of the ladies with extreme satisfaction. "Walk in, please, and a thousand welcomes."

He led the way up the steps and into the handsomely furnished parlors, and was followed in due course by all the members of the party, with a single exception.

That exception was furnished by the old cavalryman, Ben Britton.

Ben had remained outside.

He stood crouching under one of the great trees shading the house, and had all the appearance of a man who had just been demoralized by some sudden and tremendous shock.

In a word, he had made a discovery which simply left him breathless, and in a half-paralyzed condition.

The nature of that discovery?

At a moment when Captain Ready turned his face unguardedly toward Mrs. Dayton, in response to one of her questions, as they were ascending the steps, in the full glare of several torches, the old cavalryman had caught a full and striking view of the robber-chief, and had instantly realized that Mr. "Hobart" was merely another name for the renowned chief of the Red Ransomers!

How terribly Britton had felt at this recognition of the imposture which had been practiced upon Alice and her friends, need not be related.

He had never received such a shock in his life.

A moment he stood clinging to a hitching-post which came opportunely in his way, and looked after the robber-chief and his dupes in silent consternation.

"What's the cap'n's little game now, Hal?" demanded one man of another, within a few rods of the cavalryman, as he thus stood motionless.

"Oh, it's hard to say, but he's doubtless playing some of his old tricks," was the answer. "Know the ladies?"

"Not in the remotest degree. They've never before been seen hereabouts, that's certain. How pretty that girl is! I reckon she'd not be talking and smiling in that way, if she knew the man she was talking to is the famous Captain Ready!"

The couple passed on, their words dying out of Britton's ears, and silence and darkness resumed their sway around him.

In what a whirl were his thoughts!

During the few days he had been in the employ of Alice Hamlin, he had learned to think as much of her as if she had been his own daughter.

What could he do?

Evidently his first measure ought to be to get out of the robber camp, so that he could carry news of the situation to Captain Haskell.

He lost no time in acting upon the thought thus suggested to him.

Ere he had gone ten rods, however, taking the direction from which he had entered the camp, he suddenly saw a sentry looming up just before him, rifle in hand, and was startled by a stern challenge.

"Who comes there?"

"A friend!" announced Britton, from mere force of habit.

"Advance, friend, and give the countersign," was the order that succeeded.

Being unable to comply with this injunction, the old cavalryman took the next best course open to him.

He turned and fled toward the house as if a demon had been after him.

An instant only he halted at the entrance, reflecting rapidly, and then he seized his revolver with a grip which meant business, and sprang into the parlor where Alice and Mrs. Dayton were seated.

"Where is that man?" he asked, glaring around the room, rather than surveying it.

No one could instantly find voice in which to reply.

All stared at Britton, as if afraid that he had suddenly been bereft of his senses.

"What man?" asked Alice, after a brief interval of silent wonder.

"That man who conducted us to the house, and who calls himself Hobart!"

"Isn't that his real name?" asked Mrs. Dayton.

"No, madam! That man is a terrible fraud and impostor! In a word, he is no other than Captain Ready!"

A silence like that of the grave reigned during the next few moments.

"How do you know that?" then asked Alice.

"I've often seen him."

"Then why didn't you tell us so sooner?" asked Dayton.

"Simply because I didn't catch a glimpse of his face until he was ascending the steps of this house under the glare of the torches."

The ladies gained their feet with a celerity which attested how thoroughly they were startled.

"What are we to do?" demanded Alice.

"We must make our escape—and be very quick about it," replied Mrs. Dayton.

"Come!" cried Britton, facing about with a quickness and precision which can only come from long practice.

At this moment a footstep was heard at the doorway by which the dupes of Ready's falsehoods had gained the apartment, and Captain Ready was seen blocking the way, with a countenance which wore a grim smile of triumph.

"Sorry to appear uncivil," he said, looking from one to another, "but there is no escape for any of you in this direction. The camp is surrounded by sentries, and it will be impossible for you to make your way past them."

Dayton drew a revolver, as did the two young men behind him, and a view of these movements caused a glance very much like lightning to appear in the eyes of Captain Ready.

"Let's have no nonsense now, gentlemen," he added, with a sternness of voice about which there could be no question. "If you undertake to use those weapons, your lives will not be worth a grain of sand! Beware!"

He put his whistle to his lips and blew a long and peculiar blast, which seemed to echo throughout the whole camp.

This sound had scarcely ceased to echo when at least a dozen of his armed followers came pouring through the two or three doors leading into the apartment.

"Take charge of these men," ordered Ready, in his most resolute tone, as he indicated Britton and Dayton, and his assistants, by a comprehensive gesture, "and shut them up securely at headquarters until further orders."

It was hard for Britton and the rest to surrender, as completely as they were overpowered, but they were wise enough to make a virtue of necessity, and in due course their hands were bound behind them, and they were marched away to close confinement.

Mrs. Dayton and Alice were left alone with their captor, and it was with a feeling of profound horror and dread that they realized their situation.

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE FACTS STATED.

CAPTAIN READY took a few nervous turns to and fro in the apartment, while Alice and Mrs. Dayton sat trembling in the chairs of which they had taken possession.

"Of course, ladies," he said, after a brief pause, as he halted in front of them and inclined himself profoundly, "I must plead guilty to a little deception in regard to my identity!"

"You are really the chief of the Red Ransomers?" demanded Mrs. Dayton, finding her voice.

"I have that honor."

"But Captain Ready is not a real name. Have you nothing better than such a mask as that to go by?"

"That 'mask' subserves every purpose that a real name could," replied the captain. "Besides, the immortal William has informed us that 'a rose by any other name would smell as sweet!' There is really no occasion for you to find fault with the assumed cognomen under which I am figuring."

"That's true enough," admitted Alice. "You would be the same wicked man under any name, or even without any. May I ask what is the moving cause of the violence of which we are the objects?"

"Certainly. There are several causes involved in my action. One of them is that I have been for some time past retaining your father in close custody."

"Ah, you avow it!" cried Alice.

"I certainly have no intention of denying the fact."

"And your purpose?"

"The very purpose which is usually apparent in all transactions of this nature," acknowledged Ready, cynically. "Your father had—and still has, I'm sorry to say—a great deal of money I was anxious to possess. It came to him easier than it would have come to me, even if he had at once acceded to my demands for it. But I was not long in discovering that Mr. Hamlin is as inflexible as a bill of granite in any resolution he has taken."

"I appreciate the compliment you pay him," returned Alice, gradually recovering her self-control, "even if I cannot thank you for it."

"It was in vain, therefore," pursued Captain Ready, "that I asked your father for a good share of his cash as a reasonable equivalent for his liberty. It was *no go*. He would not harken to me."

The girl's eyes began glowing with a proud and defiant light.

Clearly enough, she was a "chip of the old block," and prepared to endure any inconvenience rather than yield to the persecutions of such a vulgar tyrant as she now had before her.

"And so you couldn't force papa to accede to your wishes?" she resumed, every instant growing calmer and calmer.

"No, I couldn't!"

"And you've kept him shut up in some gloomy dungeon?"

"Naturally enough!"

"Poor papa! Where is he? Can I not see him, and immediately?"

"No, you cannot!"

The response was so emphatic that the girl's heart sunk within her.

"Why not?" she faltered.

"Because I do not know where he is."

Alice turned pale.

What did he mean?

Had her father's prolonged captivity been fatal to him?

Was he dead?

Her lips refused for a moment to shape the dreadful question.

"No, he's not dead," then answered Captain Ready, with ill-concealed annoyance. "If he had died, I shouldn't have fretted at the circumstance. I should have taken it as natural and inevitable. But the real sting of the situation is that he made his escape."

For a few moments Alice could not accept the evidence of her senses.

The statement of her captor seemed too good to be true.

But she could not mistake the meaning of the sullen wrath and annoyance she saw reflected upon the robber's countenance.

"What place did he escape from?" demanded Alice. "And how?"

Captain Ready briefly gave her the particulars.

"And where has he gone?"

"I have not yet been able to discover exactly where," avowed the captain, "but I readily foresee that he will take his way to the camp of

Captain Haskell, who has been hanging about this neighborhood for some time past, with the avowed intention of effecting his release."

"You really believe this?"

"I certainly do."

"Then the situation is not so dark as I supposed," declared Alice, with a sigh of relief. "If papa is indeed out of your hands and safe in the midst of Captain Haskell and his men, I will not worry. But you spoke of having several reasons for the course you have taken toward me. What are they?"

"Are they not evident enough?" queried Captain Ready, as his features again assumed a smiling expression. "What could be more to the point than for you to stumble into my hands just as your father got out of them? Are you not a fair equivalent for him any day?"

There was a deep and dangerous glitter in the eyes of the questioner which Alice was quick to notice.

"Certainly," resumed the villain, "if he was content to undergo all sorts of misery rather than pay ransom, he will not be at all inclined to let you suffer in that way a moment longer than's necessary! Prisoner for prisoner, I'd sooner have you than your father. With you in my hands and at my mercy, Miss Hamlin, I may rest assured that my demand for a ransom will not be neglected."

There was no denying this logic.

Mrs. Dayton turned pale with a flood of terrible apprehensions.

"You mean to deprive us of our liberty, Captain Ready?" she asked.

"I most certainly do," was the answer.

"And for how long a time?"

"Until Mr. Hamlin has been informed of your whereabouts and of the conditions under which you can recover your freedom."

Alice grew pale at the thought.

"For some days, then!" she murmured.

"Yes—possible for weeks. If your father should really reach the camp of Captain Haskell, it will be no easy matter for me to get hold of him again, and I shall have to build all my hopes upon the compensation a hard fate has given me—namely, your presence!"

Mrs. Dayton sighed profoundly.

"In what a terrible situation we are placed!" she murmured.

The poor lady was not far out of the way.

"Of course," added Ready, after he had taken two or three turns in the room, "I am not disposed to be unnecessarily harsh with you. That I must take measures for your safe-keeping is apparent on the face of things, but I will be as kind as I can. To do so is not only a policy but a pleasure. I am not without a hope, Miss Hamlin," and he again inclined himself before the girl, "that you will respond, sooner or later, to the affection which flamed up in my soul at sight of you. I hope—"

"You are a good-for-nothing, vile creature," interrupted Mrs. Dayton, with the boldness of a keen wrath and disgust, "and we'd sooner be spared the affliction of your presence and 'hopes' than not. Have the goodness to leave us!"

Captain Ready was annoyed at this outburst, but such things had been too common in his experience to make any lasting impression.

"I have not yet told you my plans concerning your comfort and safe-keeping, Miss Hamlin," he resumed, without heeding Mrs. Dayton's interruption. "Permit me to add, therefore, that the apartment immediately over us is at your disposal and you will find there everything you may need in the way of food and drink. Shall I have the pleasure of escorting you to the room in question?"

"Perhaps that will be as well, and then there'll be no danger of our making a mistake!" replied Alice.

She arose with alacrity, as Ready took a lighted lamp from the mantle-piece, and followed him to the apartment of which he had spoken.

It was hard for Mrs. Dayton to do likewise, but, after two or three protests, in the shape of heavy sighs, she followed the example thus set her.

The apartment offered the ladies was not only comfortable, but elegant.

A few moments were spent by Captain Ready in explaining to the ladies the nature of their surroundings, as also the line of conduct he should expect from them.

"Of course you are free within the limits of this house," he concluded, "and I will take good care that you are neither intruded upon nor molested. But I must caution you not to take a step out of doors until you have received permission from me to do so. There will be a line of sentries around the house by day as well as by night, and it will be no more possible for you to traverse this line than it will be possible for any intruder to make his way past it. In other words, you are at liberty, but the liberty I leave you does not extend an inch beyond the limits of this house."

"All this is bad enough, certainly," commented Alice, "but we will try to derive comfort from the reflection that it might be worse. That we shall remain here a great while, I will not believe. In some way, Captain Ready, we

shall be able to give you as great a shock of surprise and disgust as has been given you by my father."

"That remains to be seen," returned the chief of the Red Ransomers, with a smile which showed his white teeth. "Certainly, if this hope makes you happy, it would be very wicked of me to destroy it. The whole matter being thus placed upon its actual footing, I hasten to wish you every possible comfort and happiness in your new situation, and will relieve you of my presence."

"Till when?" asked Mrs. Dayton.

"Well, till this time to-morrow," declared Ready, "unless you should get so weary and lonely here as to be inclined to send for me sooner."

Once more the robber inclined himself profoundly, directing his salute especially to Alice, and then he turned upon his heel and took his departure.

The captives listened a moment, while he descended the stairs and locked all the doors—taking good care to assure themselves that he locked himself out—and then they turned and threw themselves into each other's arms, with a flood of long pent-up grief and pain.

In what a situation they found themselves! What would be its end?

CHAPTER XXXIII. NEWS OF ALICE.

Nick and his friends had not proceeded far on their journey toward the Union Pacific, when they were surprised to see a little cavalcade come riding toward them from a point at nearly right angles with their course.

"Now, who can that be?" asked Captain Haskell, slackening speed. "Evidently some one who is coming this way to intercept us."

"Yes, they have business with us, clearly enough," said Nick. "See! they are signaling us to stop!"

The captain ordered his men to halt, and then gave his attention to the new-comers with a favorite glass.

"Why, it's my lieutenant," he declared—"a lieutenant I sent east, with several men, in quest of two reprobates named Gilman and Brower who have been guilty of almost every infamy except murder."

He referred, of course, to "Dirker" and "Ben Rodman," who had imposed upon Alice Hamlin and her mother to such an extent as to lead the daughter to undertake the journey which had resulted so disastrously for her.

Ere long the lieutenant had joined his superior, and received a very cordial greeting from him, which was in due course succeeded by presentation of the new-comer to Nick Peddie and Mr. Hamlin, as well as Gordon Vorce.

A few observations were pleasantly exchanged by the various members of the party.

"But how does it happen that you are back so soon, lieutenant?" then asked Captain Haskell. "Your luck must have been very good or else very poor?"

"Well, captain, it has certainly not been the latter," declared the new-comer with an air of contentment which was quite the contrary of the mien worn by a man who has been unfortunate.

"Ah, you found the chaps, then?"

"Yes, sir, even before I really began looking for them. Fact is, they met me about half-way from the Missouri!"

"They did? How was that?"

"Why, they were figuring as the guides of a young lady who was coming this way to look for her father, who has been captured by the Red Ransomers. By the way, the young lady's name is the same as that of your friend here—Hamlin."

Mr. Hamlin fairly reeled with the shock given him by this information.

"The same as mine?" he gasped.

"Yes, sir," assured the lieutenant. "The name of the young lady in question is Alice Hamlin."

The escaped prisoner gasped for breath, unable to speak.

"And she is attended by a motherly lady friend who bears the name of Mrs. Dayton, as also by Mrs. Dayton's husband."

These names told the story!

Mr. Hamlin realized who the young lady in question was.

"Excuse this agitation, lieutenant," he cried in a husky voice, "but the young lady to whom you refer is my daughter. I am—or rather have been—the prisoner she was coming this way to release!"

"Ought she not to have been here before now, lieutenant?" asked Captain Haskell, with a sudden shadow on his face and forehead.

"Most assuredly."

"Then where is she?"

"You have seen nothing of her?"

"Nothing whatever."

The fact looked grave to all present.

Evidently Alice was in trouble.

"Of course those deserters have been in no situation to interfere with her?" queried Haskell, musingly.

"No, captain," replied the lieutenant, "for the reason that they have been shut up like rats

in a trap from the moment of their arrest, and are likely to remain so for a long time to come."

"How are we to explain the non-arrival of Miss Hamlin, in that case?"

"Perhaps—"

The father could not speak the fear which arose to his lips.

But Captain Haskell did not have the same scruples about the matter.

"Perhaps she has fallen into the hands of the Red Ransomers," he suggested, with a soldier-like frankness. "Nothing is more likely—that's certain. What do you say to that, lieutenant?"

"I fear that theory is the correct one," was the answer.

"And why so?" asked Mr. Hamlin.

"Because," explained the lieutenant, "I have been so close upon the trail of Miss Hamlin and her friends that I heard of them two or three times a day on an average. I may even add that I learned late yesterday where they intended to pass the night."

At this statement everybody was all attention.

Such a fact as that must certainly be full of significance.

"And where was that?" asked Haskell.

"At the Rolling Tavern!"

The declaration produced an excitement resembling an explosion.

At the Rolling Tavern!

There was no need to say more to any one who knew that place of resort as well as Captain Haskell had learned to know it through the reports of his soldiers.

"Why, if Miss Hamlin and her friends went to the Rolling Tavern," pursued the captain, "there are forty ways in which she may have got into trouble. Not only is the house fairly haunted by red-skins and white outlaws, but the old couple who keep it are legitimate objects of suspicion."

"Let all that be as it may," said Mr. Hamlin, mastering his emotion by a strong effort, "I cannot go another step toward the Union Pacific until this mystery respecting my daughter's whereabouts has been solved."

"Certainly not," approved Haskell.

"Of course we must turn back," declared Nick Peddie, with keen sympathy for the man he had rescued. "Is not this your opinion, Mr. Vorce?"

"It certainly is," replied the object of this inquiry. "Little did I think when I told you a few minutes ago, that I could go no further with you, Mr. Peddie, than the crest of the next ridge, that we would all have occasion to retrace our steps so promptly."

"Still you approve of the idea of returning?" queried Mr. Hamlin anxiously.

"I certainly do."

A brief conversation took place between Haskell and his lieutenant in relation to various business points of the trip the latter had completed, and then they separated, the lieutenant proceeding in the direction of the nearest fort, which was, in fact, his headquarters.

"Perhaps I had better say a word to you in confidence, Captain Haskell," said Gordon Vorce at this moment.

"Certainly," replied Haskell, passing his arm through that of Vorce and leading the way beyond the hearing of any one else. "I shall be glad to hear your suggestions."

"Thanks, captain," said Vorce. "I will speak in all frankness. The object of my presence in this vicinity is to 'get square' with the man who calls himself Captain Ready."

"Indeed! Who is he?"

"His real name is Albert Walker. Don't you remember the affair of the 'black horseman,' of a few years ago?"

"Of course I do," returned Haskell, with a start of sudden comprehension. "Do you mean to tell me that you are the Vorce who was mixed up in that affair?"

"The same, sir."

"The very man who was condemned to twenty years' imprisonment?"

Vorce assented.

"And who—who—"

"Yes, sir, the same who sacrificed his thumb," and Vorce held up his mutilated hand, "for the sake of obtaining his freedom."

"But your good name was cleared," pursued Haskell, with an air that was keenly sympathetic.

"Of course it was; but that fact could not bring back from the grave my father and mother. All this, however, is a digression from what I set out to say to you. Having come here for the express purpose of making trouble for the chief of the Red Ransomers, I have been playing the spy over him for weeks past, and have got all his affairs down to a fine point."

"Good! I am glad to hear it. Give me the details."

"To begin with," resumed Vorce, "I have found a way of entering the camp of the robbers in such a way that none of the sentries, who are always on guard, have been so fortunate as to discover just how my goings and comings are accomplished."

"You have? Nothing could be better," com-

mented Haskell. "Are you willing to enter the camp to-night, and see if Miss Hamlin is there?"

"That's the very work I was about to suggest to you, captain."

"Good again! I shall certainly be very glad to have your assistance. Shall you require company?"

"To the contrary, captain. I shall be less nervous if I go alone. I would even suggest that you come to a halt, or go into camp temporarily, not far from where we now are. In this way, you will be within supporting distance, and not near enough to run any risk of being discovered by the robbers!"

"Your suggestion is a good one," returned Haskell, "and I will act upon it."

He gave an order to his first sergeant, and in due course the men took possession of a spot which was excellent for defensive purposes, at the same time that it was in no wise hampered and inconvenienced by those obstructions and other drawbacks which are usually associated with really fine localities for a camp.

"And now to stay here till night," suggested Gordon Vorce, addressing his remarks particularly to Mr. Hamlin and Nick. "But as soon as darkness has set in, I will enter the camp of the Red Ransomers without asking permission, and I have no doubt of soon being able to decide whether Miss Hamlin has been seen there or not."

He reflected a moment, and then added:

"If I am not mistaken, Mr. Peddie, you are very anxious to go with me?"

Nick avowed the fact.

"Then I will count upon your assistance. Two will not be enough to attract much attention, even in a tight place, and your presence will make the rescue of the prisoners all the more certain."

CHAPTER XXXIV.

AN EXCITING MASQUERADE.

DURING the remaining hours of the day Gordon Vorce made several expeditions from the camp—two of which were of considerable duration—but no one gave any particular attention to the fact, although Nick was a little intrigued by these goings and comings.

Late in the afternoon, Vorce appeared at Captain Haskell's tent, where Nick was talking with the captain and Mr. Hamlin, and suggested that it was about time to be moving.

"Ought we not to disguise ourselves?" demanded Nick.

"Certainly," was the answer. "You especially. You are too well dressed. We are going to figure as free-and-easy knights of the road, dancing the next few hours, and must dress accordingly. Fortunately I have at hand everything we may require in this line, and you're only to place yourself at my disposal."

Nick hastened to do so and the couple took temporary leave of Mr. Hamlin and Captain Haskell, who wished them success in their dangerous undertaking, and made a number of suggestions looking to their safety and comfort.

As the first shadows of night began falling, Nick and Vorce drew near the camp of the Red Ransomers, with the air of being perfectly at their ease.

Both were somewhat elaborately disguised, not merely with clothes, but with false beards and wigs, and with the free use of paints and colors.

Their best friends could not have possibly known them.

"Are we not in danger of being seen by the robbers?" suddenly asked Nick, as the light of a camp-fire dawned upon his gaze from a central position in the camp.

Vorce assented.

"We have been seen already," he announced, with the smiling mien of one who considers himself master of the situation. "Didn't you see me raise both of my hands over my head in a peculiar way a moment ago?"

"I did, sure enough!"

"Well, that was to tell the Ransomers that we are members of the band. At any rate that was the signal by which the real members announce their identity, and I haven't a doubt that we shall pass unsuspected and unquestioned."

"You have been here before, then?" queried Nick wonderingly.

"Yes, not only to-day, but many a time, Mr. Peddie. In fact, I have been figuring as a Red Ransomer for several weeks past. I'm known here as Dave Wilder."

Nick expressed the curiosity to which such a masquerade naturally gave rise.

"And such being my present status, I shall have to give you a new name, in order that you may be a suitable companion for me," pursued Vorce smilingly. "What name shall I use, in case I should have occasion to give you some call or warning?"

"It matters little, no doubt. Suppose I figure as Crottle—Tom Crottle?"

The suggestion was duly approved.

"But will not all the robbers see that I am a stranger?" added Nick.

"Certainly," replied Vorce, "but that fact does not signify anything. There are new

arrivals here almost every day. Were it otherwise, the band of Red Ransomers would soon run out, so many are the losses and withdrawals. The fact that you are with me is a sufficient voucher for your authenticity."

"And we shall have no difficulty about entering the camp?"

"Not the least. No password is required until after dark, and I shall have it, of course, as soon as any one else. I may as well add that I expect to be on guard to-night, and this will be a point in favor of good results. But here we are. Please model your conduct after mine, and leave me to do all the talking."

Nick nodded assent, and the couple rode directly into the camp, by a route that was evidently in general use.

The hour being one of the busiest in the whole day for the robbers—namely, that devoted to their suppers and their preparations for the night—the arrival of Wilder and his associate attracted no especial attention, beyond a question from the sentry who was on guard at that side of the camp.

"I'll take you to my tent," remarked Vorce, leading the way toward one of the most retired nooks to be found within the line of sentries, "and you'll be safe there while I take the horses to their quarters."

The tent in question was soon reached.

It was one of many similar abodes, but it stood between two great pines, with a group of remarkable rocks behind it, so that it would not have been an easy matter to mistake any other for it.

"Do you mean to tell me that you have this tent all to yourself?" asked Nick, as the two men dismounted.

"Such is the case, Crottle," replied Vorce, motioning his associate to enter. "Keep quiet here until I return to you."

Nick entered the tent, with a nod of compliance, and Vorce walked away with the horses.

When he came back, a couple of minutes later, he found Nick contemplating his surroundings with an air of keen interest.

"I see there are two camp-beds," observed Nick, accepting the stool to which Vorce motioned him. "Is one of them some friend or chum who is with you regularly?"

"Yes, for an associate who has been keeping me company," replied Vorce, "but who is now absent, and who does not expect to be seen here again," and the speaker lowered his voice with an air of mystery. "No doubt you'll have occasion to see him later. He's that chap who introduced himself to you as a 'Prairie Kitten,' and who told you to call him Dan. He and I have been busy lately," and Vorce grew still more guarded in speech and aspect, "with certain affairs of our own about which you shall be enlightened within a day or two."

Nick saw that his new friend was a prey to a deep excitement, and readily guessed the cause.

"You have news of Miss Hamlin?" he queried.

"Yes," was the answer. "She's here—in the captain's house—and her friends are close prisoners at headquarters."

Nick drew a sigh of relief.

He deemed it better to know that the girl was a prisoner than to be wholly ignorant of her whereabouts.

"Just how she has fallen into the hands of the captain," added Vorce, "I have not yet had time to learn, but I have no doubt he has made use of some deception or trick."

Footsteps were heard approaching at this moment, and the next instant Captain Ready looked in upon the two masqueraders.

CHAPTER XXXV.

MAKING THEIR WAY.

THE couple arose respectfully, as the followers of Ready were in the habit of doing at his approach.

"Ah, here you are, Wilder?" greeted the chief, sitting down on one of the camp beds. "I have been here two or three times to see you."

The manner of Ready was uneasy and preoccupied, and it seemed to both masqueraders that his glances were somewhat suspicious.

"Who's this man?" added the robber-chief, as his glance settled searchingly upon Nick.

"He's a cousin of mine—Tom Crottle—who has just deserted from the camp of Captain Haskell," declared Vorce, who did not hesitate a moment to invent any explanation that might be required for the success of his plans. "I was about to bring him to you, and should have presented him to you before now, if he hadn't been chased to our very lines by his late associates, and had to rest here a few moments to recover his breath."

"Is he all right?" asked Ready, searching Wilder's face intently.

"Perfectly right, captain," assured Vorce.

"I am willing to be responsible for him."

"But who'll be responsible for you, Dave?" returned Ready, with a serious air he rarely assumed to his men. "Some of the boys have been to me with reports of your mysterious goings and comings, and one or two have ex-

pressed some decided insinuations against your good faith!"

"That's because I do not take them into my confidence, I suppose," said Vorce, with apparent frankness.

"You do not deny, then, that you have been out of camp repeatedly to-day, as on many other days?" pursued Ready.

"Certainly not, sir."

"What's the cause of all these movements?"

Vorce looked from his tent, listening a moment, and then answered, lowering his voice to a mere whisper:

"I intended to tell you this evening. I found a very valuable diamond the other day, in one of the Red Hill ravines, and have been searching and searching in the hope of turning out another of the same sort!"

He handed over a very handsome uncut stone, which must have weighed in the rough at least fifteen carats.

Its general contour was circular, but it nevertheless displayed two or three angles where the fire of a real diamond was present in its unmistakable beauty.

"By thunder! it's the real thing!" cried Ready excitedly, as he took the gem and turned it over and over critically. "I'm glad you've kept still about it. Is there any prospect of finding more of these fellows, do you think?"

"There's certainly good hopes of it," replied Vorce. "I'll take you to the ravine in question to-morrow, and you shall judge for yourself."

The robber chief gave the diamond another brief examination, and then extended it to the finder.

"Oh, it's yours, captain," said the latter, withdrawing his hand, "and I dare say we shall find its mate to-morrow."

The chief expressed his thanks, his whole manner undergoing a change.

If he had arrived with suspicions, it was clear enough now that he had entirely dismissed them.

"And as to these chaps, captain, who are so busy with my affairs," added Vorce, "permit me to suggest that they are probably accusing me to cover some of their own shortcomings."

The remark was effective.

The chief mused a few moments, carefully stowing away the diamond in a secret pocket, and then he said:

"At any rate, they'll have to offer a few facts before they'll find much of a hearing. In the mean time, I want you and your friend, Dave, to do me a favor."

His hearers were all devotion, of course, and hastened to say so.

"You have heard about my prisoners," resumed Ready. "Among them is a girl who has struck my fancy, and I am resolved to make an impression upon her heart at the same time that I lay an effective siege to her father's pocket-book."

He proceeded to give a rapid outline of the situation, as we have already presented it to the reader, and then added:

"Now what I want is to guard Miss Hamlin in such a way that she cannot make her escape, and that no one from outside can communicate with her. Will you take charge of her for the night, Dave, and be responsible for her?"

"With great pleasure, captain, if you will let me have Crottle for an assistant, and give orders to the rest of the band to keep at a distance, and not trouble us or distract our attention by their intrusions."

"I'll see to that, of course," assured the chief.

"By the way, Crottle," and he turned to his supposed new recruit, "where is Captain Haskell encamped?"

Nick frankly gave the particulars, with a conviction that they could do his friends no harm, and that possibly Ready was already enlightened on the subject.

"Is Mr. Hamlin with the captain?"

"He is, sir."

"About how many men, all told, has Haskell with him?"

Nick gave an approximation of the number, taking care not to make it too small.

"So many?" commented Ready. "I shall have to wait for a few more recruits before I shall feel warranted to make an attempt to wipe them out. Possibly half a dozen of us could abduct Hamlin, by making a bold raid upon the enemy about two o'clock in the morning. I'll think the matter over. In the mean time, if you'll come with me," and he arose briskly, "I'll give you all the necessary instructions, and leave you at your posts."

CHAPTER XXXVI.

NICK AND VORCE AT WORK.

THE installation of the two sentries was the work of a few moments.

Nick was placed at the front of the house with the entrance as the center of his post, while Vorce was assigned to the rear.

It was arranged that the couple should remain on guard until midnight.

"I may as well give you my reasons," observed Ready, after he had briefly set forth his wishes to this effect. "I paid the girl and her old attendant a visit this morning, and was disagreeably impressed by their deportment. Mrs.

Dayton would hardly waste a word upon me, while Miss Hamlin confined her remarks to a few scornful comments upon the treatment to which she was being subjected, and to repetitions of her declaration that she'd soon be out of my clutches. In short, the girl's manner was so defiant and hopeful, that I could do no less than suspect that the couple have made an arrangement with one of the many sentries who were on duty here during last night to free them!

"That is indeed a natural conclusion to come to," commented Vorce.

"I want you, therefore, to be as watchful as if life were at stake," resumed the robber-chief, with an air as resolute as uneasy, "and to take good care that none of the men who were on guard last night find the least opportunity of communicating with the prisoners. I will relieve you at midnight, either in person, or by a couple of men I can trust."

Nick nodded assent.

"There's no danger, I suppose," queried Vorce, with assumed carelessness, "that the other prisoners will interfere with us?"

"Not the least. They're too well-guarded."

"Is Dan in charge of them?"

"He is."

Vorce turned away with the air of having heard all he desired to know.

Possibly, too, he wished to hide a look of involuntary satisfaction that stole over his features and flashed from his eye.

A few further remarks and suggestions were offered by Captain Ready, and then he walked away toward his tent, with a final injunction to watchfulness.

As soon as he had gone, the two sentries exchanged congratulations upon the rare fortune which had befallen them.

They were not only just where they wanted to be, but they were there by authority, and in a fair way to command the weighty results they had so much at heart.

"Did you really find that diamond?" was Nick's next question.

"Of course not," was the answer. "I have not only carried that diamond ever since I became a Red Ransomer, but also the explanation. In other terms, that diamond business is merely one of sundry methods I have invented of explaining such situations as that I have just weathered."

The two sentries took several turns to and fro at their posts, carefully scrutinizing their surroundings, and then they halted again at one of the front corners of the house.

"I suppose Miss Hamlin is in that front room up stairs?" queried Nick, sending a glance in the direction indicated and speaking in a whisper.

"Where the light is, you mean? Yes, that's doubtless her prison."

"How still she is! What grief and apprehension she must feel!"

"No doubt of that," returned Vorce, as his gaze took the same route as his companion's. "I can imagine no worse misery than for a girl to be the captive of Ready."

Nick was too pained to pursue the subject, and walked off abruptly, taking several new turns in silence.

Then he came back to his associate.

"How are we to open communications with her?" he demanded, in the same guarded tone as before. "How let her know that we are her friends?"

"That's what I'd like to know," replied Vorce, with a dubious air. "So far, she has not looked out—not even when we were talking to Ready!"

"And even if she was to see us she'd consider us robbers, and shrink from saying a word to us," suggested Nick.

"Possibly not, sir. She might be desperate enough to make an appeal to us to assist her in escaping!"

At this moment the light in the chamber above them was extinguished.

"What can that mean?" said Nick. "That Miss Hamlin is about to retire?"

"Hardly," replied Vorce. "It's more likely that she is about to appeal to us for help, as I suggested. Now that her light is extinguished, she can raise her window unseen."

The two men continued to watch and listen, remaining motionless.

The clatter of a sliding sash was soon heard, and they comprehended that the fair prisoner had raised her window.

They could even make out the outlines of her head and shoulders, as she knelt beside the aperture, peering down upon them.

"Can you see me?" she asked, in a voice as low as a summer zephyr.

"Indistinctly—yes," answered Nick, his heart already in a flutter.

"Will you come nearer?"

Vorce signified to Nick, by pinching his arm, that he was to respond, and then shouldered his rifle and resumed his walk to and fro, to give himself the air of attending to business.

Nick glided under the window, and Alice Hamlin looked down upon him.

"I suppose that you know that I am a prisoner here?" she whispered, in a sufficiently high key to reach him.

"Certainly," he answered. "We are placed here to prevent your escape."

"And you are willing to assist that man in his horrible persecutions?"

Her tones were sadly reproachful.

"It looks that way, I admit," returned Nick, with a voice that betrayed both sympathy and interest. "But we are here as your friends, Miss Hamlin!"

"Ah! You know who I am?"

"And how you happen to be in this painful situation! If you will lower a string of any sort to me, I shall take pleasure in sending you a message!"

The captive hastened to avail herself of the suggestion, making use of a piece of cord she detached from the curtain of the window.

Nick secured to the end of the cord thus lowered a letter Mr. Hamlin had given him in view of a possible opening of communications with the captive.

"There! you can pull it up now!" he whispered, in a tone which attested how keen was his delight.

Alice hastened to comply, and the missive was soon in her hands, Mrs. Dayton at the same instant turning a ray of light gradually upon it.

What a start Alice gave as she recognized the handwriting of the address, and how quickly she tore open the envelope!

The few lines she had under her gaze read as follows:

"The noble young fellow who hands you this is named Nick Peddie. You can trust him precisely as you would trust

PAPA."

CHAPTER XXXVII.

NICK AND ALICE.

THE joy and relief with which Alice read these lines brought a swift flush to her features.

She hastened to look out again.

"You have indeed brought me a welcome message, sir," she said, as she passed the communication to Mrs. Dayton. "Please wait a moment!"

She closed the window and lowered the curtain, and by this time Mrs. Dayton had taken cognizance of the precious epistle, and was bubbling over with delight.

"How nice! how providential! is it not, Alice?" she murmured. "What shall we say? What shall we do?"

"I must go down-stairs," replied Alice, "to the window immediately under this, and consult with Mr. Peddie as to the ways and means of escape!"

"But Ready may see you again," suggested Mrs. Dayton, as she turned up the lamp.

"No harm can come of that," responded Alice thoughtfully. "You will remember that the robber-chief gave us permission to go anywhere in the house!"

"Ah! So he did!"

"I'll accordingly take that smaller lamp and go down to the room under this," pursued Alice, arising. "I need not show much light—not enough to tell any one outside that we are stirring. There'll be no trouble about inventing excuses if Ready should see me. For instance, I can tell him that I was looking to see if we were quite alone in the house, and so on."

She seized the lamp of which she had spoken, and glided away, with a graceful nod, descending the stairs.

As far as she could see, in the limited light she ventured to use, the room on the ground floor was Ready's parlor or reception-room.

Certainly, to judge by the boots, weapons, cigars and bottles that were visible, she could not doubt that the Red Ransomer was its principal tenant.

She was pleased to find that he was now absent, and that the building evidently held no other tenant at the moment than Mrs. Dayton and herself.

Placing her lamp on a table at the rear of the room, and as far as possible from the window she proposed to utilize, Alice proceeded, with a strangely fluttering heart, to place herself again in communication with Nick.

Her first measure was to raise both the curtain and the window, and then she looked cautiously out.

Nick stood within a few feet of her, attentive and silent, and Vorce could be barely made out, as he paced to and fro at his post, but nothing was seen of any one else.

"I am so glad to see you, Mr. Peddie," whispered Alice, offering her hand, as Nick stepped briskly to meet her. "You have left my father safe?"

"Quite so, I am very glad to say," replied Nick, pressing the girl's hand with sympathetic fervor. "He has made his escape from the robbers, and has taken refuge in Captain Haskell's camp!"

"Thank Heaven! I dare say you had a hand in his deliverance?"

"I cannot deny it!"

"And you are here with a view to my rescue from this horrible situation?"

"Yes, Miss Hamlin."

"What relief! I am especially glad on Mrs. Dayton's account, she has suffered so intensely at the thought of her husband's captivity and

peril. Is it possible that you will free him also?"

"Doubtless. My friend yonder evidently has some ideas to that end of which he has not spoken!"

"Shall we go now, or later?"

"Two or three hours hence, if you can be patient so long," suggested Nick thoughtfully. "By that time, the great body of the Ransomers will have retired for the night, and we shall have to take into account only the sentries. Meanwhile, too, we shall doubtless be able to communicate with Mr. Dayton and Mr. Britton, so that we can all take our departure together!"

"Oh, if we might!" sighed Alice.

"We will certainly try to realize your hopes," said Nick, with such a kindly voice that Alice could not help flushing, although he could not see her face. "In the mean time, I suppose Ready has left you to yourselves, and made you comfortable, as regards food and other essentials?"

"Yes—yes!"

"Of course it is very terrible to be in such a situation," pursued Nick, while his honest face glowed with emotions to which he had until that hour been a stranger, "but I can pledge you my word that you really have nothing to fear, and that you shall be in your father's arms long before daylight."

"Thank you, sir!" murmured Alice, gratefully, as tears of joy moistened her eyes. "That assurance is quite enough to render Mrs. Dayton and myself patient until you can come for us. Consult with your friend and go on with all your affairs without the least reference to us. You will find us here, at this window, whenever you may come for us, and until then, possessing the great consolation of knowing that papa is safe, I can be as patient as hopeful."

"That is all I require to know," declared Nick, passing more and more under the spell of the bright eyes and radiant features before him. "Remain on the watch here until we have found means of communicating with Mr. Dayton—"

"Hush! Some one comes!"

Nick turned away quietly, while Alice closed the window in silence.

A tall figure had indeed stalked into view, approaching Vorce, but the attitude of the latter attested that nothing was to be feared from this quarter.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

LIVELY TIMES IN CAMP.

THE new-comer, in fact, was Dan, the "Prairie Kitten!"

He had a fine cigar between his lips, and was strolling through the camp with the air of being quite at his leisure.

"Will you smoke, boys?" he asked, as Nick advanced to meet him.

Both accepted the weeds offered them, and proceeded to light them.

"Your friend here, Mr. Wilder," resumed the new-comer, addressing his remarks to Nick, "has told me, during the afternoon, the nature of the business which brings you here, and it is needless to add that I am as one with you in its execution."

Nick experienced a keen thrill of relief at this assurance.

"I will talk with Wilder about the details, Mr. Crottle, while you keep up the pretense of being on guard," pursued Dan, "and he'll post you later. I don't think Ready is on the watch," and he sent a keen glance in every direction around him, "but there is too much at stake for us to take any risk of detection."

Nick assented to these views, and took his way to the rear of the house, where he began pacing to and fro with watchful glances, carrying his rifle in the hollow of his arm.

How nervous he was, how anxious, need not be stated.

The few glimpses he had had of Alice, and especially the remarks they had exchanged, had stirred his soul to its foundations.

In a word, he loved her.

To rescue her and restore her to Mr. Hamlin, was a result for which he would not have hesitated to give his life.

"You are still in charge of the guard-house?" queried Vorce of his associate, as soon as they were left together.

"Yes, Dave; but it's the last night I'll ever pass here."

Dan's voice was gloomy, and his face dark with pain and disgust.

"There's something wrong, then?"

"Yes. I've just been out with a detail to bury Doctor Foster."

"Ah! he's dead?"

"They found him cold in his prison this morning," replied Dan. "As you have doubtless noticed, Ready has been very hard upon him, with a view to break down his obstinacy, as he called it, and human nature couldn't stand such a diet longer."

Vorce heaved a profound sigh.

He felt as indignant as his associate in regard to the murder which had thus been accomplished.

The man under discussion was a wealthy pris-

oner who had been held to ransom, like so many others, including Mr. Hamlin, and who had preferred death to a compliance with the demands of his captors.

"He's the third who has slipped through Ready's fingers since I have been figuring here as a Ransomer," said Vorce. "Heaven knows how ardently I have desired to come to his relief, and what efforts I have made to reach him. I have repeatedly run the risk of losing my own life in the attempt to help him."

"I can say as much," declared Dan. "But Ready has guarded him with a special and vindictive care. Have you any suspicion of the cause of this animosity?"

"Yes, Dan. My impression is that the doctor was aware of Ready's real name and history. At any rate, that is the only explanation I can give of the rigor with which he has been treated."

Vorce remained silent a few moments, drawing his cigar vigorously, and then asked:

"How long shall we wait, Dan?"

Dan cast a sharp glance over the camp and into the darkness around him.

"Not long, if it's left to me, Dave," he answered. "I'm getting nervous about Ready. I don't like his maneuvers for the last few hours. Evidently he has something on his mind. Possibly he may be considering some foul scheme against Miss Hamlin. In any case, it's about as dark now as it will be to-night, and we may as well act soon as later."

"Do you think Ready has made any discovery in regard to what we have been doing during the last ten days?" asked Vorce, in a mere whisper.

"No, or he'd arouse the whole camp on the instant. But there's danger that he may get track of our operations at any moment, and the sooner we are conspicuous by our absence the better. Are you going to the cave again?"

"Yes—as talked."

Dan took two or three short turns in silence, with a nervous air and then came back to the bogus ransomer.

"Upon the whole, Dave," he whispered, "we may as well act now. The ladies are of course ready to escape at any time, and you and Nick had better get them out of the house as soon as I am gone and conceal them in the arbor or beside it. By the time you have accomplished that measure, I will release Dayton and Britton secretly and send them here to you."

"Can you act without being suspected, Dan?"

"I think so," was the reply. "At any rate, I'll take the risk. My idea is to hang around after you are gone, and so be the first to discover the escape of the prisoners. Such a course will tend to divert suspicion from me. If all goes well, I can remain with Ready until to-morrow, and so inform myself of all measures he may take to pursue his escaped prisoners."

A few further remarks were exchanged, and, Dan sauntered away, as quietly as he had come.

He had scarcely passed out of view when Nick hastened to Vorce, who informed him in a few rapid sentences, of the decision which had been reached.

"This just suits me," was Nick's response, with a sigh of relief. "Mr. Hamlin and Captain Haskell must now be waiting for us at the spot agreed upon, with a strong detachment of cavalry men, and it would really be too bad to delay another minute."

"Then go and assist the ladies through the window, if there's no way of opening the door."

Nick hastened to comply.

Alice and Mrs. Dayton had remained on the watch, so as to be ready to second the proceedings of their new friends, and in less than a minute after Nick's return they had been assisted to the ground and conducted to the rendezvous Dan had mentioned.

"Why do we halt here?" asked Mrs. Dayton, with an anxiety she did not seek to conceal.

"For your husband and Mr. Britton," replied Alice, who had already been informed of the facts by Nick.

"Oh! is it true?" returned Mrs. Dayton.

"Are they to be released with us?"

"Such at least is the understanding," replied Nick. "They'll doubtless be here within a few minutes."

"Hush! what's that?" murmured Alice.

Footsteps were heard approaching rapidly, and a man rushed into view, approaching the little group presented by the ladies and the deliverer.

This man was easily seen to be Captain Ready. A cry of terror escaped Mrs. Dayton, calling the fierce glance of the robber chief upon her, and consequently upon Alice and Nick.

"Ah! what's going on here?" cried the startled Red Ransomer, with an oath. "Both of you out of the house! And that new recruit with you? Oh, I see your little game!"

His hand was as busy as his tongue, and even before his angry words had ceased to echo he had leveled a revolver point-blank at Nick and pulled the trigger.

Fortunately it missed fire, and ere it could be repeated Nick had leveled his assailant to the ground with a single swift movement of his rifle.

"Silence!" was his stern injunction, as a suppressed scream came from Mrs. Dayton, and at the same instant he hurled himself upon his prostrate and stunned adversary, and proceeded to bind him.

As he completed this task, rapid footsteps again resounded, and the other released prisoners, Dayton and Britton, came hurrying in that direction, followed by their two assistants.

Mrs. Dayton nearly fainted at sight of them, her first thought being that they were robbers, but a word from her husband undeceived her, and the next instant she lay sobbing in his arms.

"Be calm now," enjoined Alice hurriedly. "We must get out of the camp as soon as possible. I suppose there are sentries to pass, Mr. Peddie?"

"At least one or two will see us," replied Nick, "and our success in dealing with them will depend upon the quiet and secrecy of our movements. Come!"

He drew the arm of the fair girl within his own and led the way toward the nearest side of the camp, Mr. and Mrs. Dayton following him, and Britton and Gordon Vorce bring up the rear.

The latter, in his character of Dave Wilder, the Ransomer, kept his rifle in readiness for use, and maintained a strict watch upon all his surroundings.

"We shall be challenged, I suppose?" questioned Britton, after a brief pause.

"Yes, but that will not signify anything, as we have the password, replied Dave.

"So far, good," murmured Alice. "I do not hear the least sound of alarm behind us. How far—"

She was interrupted by loud cries which she knew came from Captain Ready.

Then shots were heard, and a regular alarm rung out from a bugle.

The whole camp was astir on the instant.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

A PAINFUL DISCOVERY.

VORCE hastened to join Nick, and the two advanced at the head of the fugitives, without other remark than an injunction to hurry.

The next moment they were halted and challenged by the sentry who happened to be in the line of their flight, and were ordered to advance and give the countersign.

This Vorce did.

"Pass on, friend," added the sentry. "Ah, it's you. What's the trouble behind you? Anything wrong?"

Vorce gave due attention to his friends, quickening their pace and seeing them all safe past the sentry, and then he answered:

"The trouble is, I suppose, that some of Haskell's people have been intruding upon us. Hark! is not that Ready's voice?"

The two men listened a moment to the voice in question.

"Sure enough," then commented the sentry. "He seems to be in hostile hands!"

"In any case, I had better go back to his rescue," said Vorce, suiting his action to the word. "He may need me."

He continued to retrace his steps until he had passed beyond the sight or hearing of the sentry.

His first object was evidently to prevent the sentry from conceiving any suspicion of him and the fugitives, and it is needless to say that his return toward the center of the camp was quite enough for this purpose.

But it was soon apparent that Vorce had still other reasons for this course.

As soon as he was again alone, he came to a halt and scanned his surroundings, listening intently.

He found himself about midway between the sentry and Ready, and out of sight of both of them.

To judge by Ready's angry and rapid tones, he had been found and released by some of his followers, and was giving orders for the pursuit.

A great uproar in the direction of the guard-house attested that the escape of Britton and Dayton, with their two young men, had been discovered.

The rapid approach of footsteps directly toward him told Vorce that the pursuers were already in motion, and he lost no time in concealing himself behind a group of rocks which happened to be within a few yards of him.

The next instant Ready came hurrying that way, followed by a dozen of his men—he on foot—they mounted.

We need not describe the rage he was in.

"Quick!" he was saying. "This is the way they went. They cannot be far distant. No doubt the sentry—"

The rest was lost in the noise caused by the horses, but Vorce comprehended.

Ready was simply telling his men that the sentry could show them in what direction the fugitives had gone.

Stepping nearer, Vorce listened to a few queries and answers exchanged by Ready and his sentry, and then watched the group of mounted robbers as they dashed away in the direction pointed out to them.

The manner of the masquerader became as jubilant as defiant.

"Much good may their pursuit do them!" he ejaculated. "Meanwhile, I may as well finish my work here and follow my friends."

Shouldering his rifle, he sauntered away toward the wooded ledge against which the camp of the Red Ransomers was backed.

As dark as was the night, he did not seem to have the least difficulty about making his way in the desired direction.

Little cared he for all the movements and voices around him.

Remaining constantly in a deep solitude, and yet finding everywhere an open and easy path—a fact which attested how familiar he was with the neighborhood—he was soon at the rear of the camp, and at the foot of a high and jagged ledge of rocks, with a face that was nearly perpendicular.

Here he halted and listened, giving especial attention to the quarter from which he had come.

All he saw and heard seemed to be satisfactory, for he drew a match and a piece of tallow torch from his pocket, producing a light, and took his way into an opening behind him, which soon developed into a cavern of remarkable size and depth.

Entering one of the ramifications of this cavern, Vorce busied himself therein nearly a quarter of an hour, then retracing his steps, with the same watchful and guarded air which had characterized his entrance.

His retreat was accompanied by a cloud of gunpowder smoke, which came drifting out of the depths in which he had been so busy, and it would have been easy to find in this smoke an explanation of two or three dull reports suggestive of explosions which had characterized the intruder's presence.

He was staggering, too, under a loaded sack, which he handled in such a way as to show that it contained valuable treasures.

"They can come now as soon as they please," he muttered, as he halted a few moments at the entrance of the cavern, in the same watchful manner as before. "They'll find that we have made a clean sweep of the last of their boasted treasures."

He staggered on under his load, after extinguishing his light, and soon reached a lonely retreat where he had left a horse an hour earlier in readiness for use.

The animal was a favorite, and greeted him with a whinny of contentment.

"All right, old fellow," ejaculated Vorce, as he laid his sack across the withers of the steed. "Our work is done here."

Leaping lightly into the saddle, he rode away at a walk, still following a path of his own, or one that was not in general use.

He had not gone far, however, when footsteps and voices resounded, and a dozen men suddenly burst into view, lighting their way with immense torches.

At their head was Captain Ready, as excited as angry, who was engaged at the moment—naturally enough—in denouncing both Wilder and Crottle as enemies and traitors, and threatening to kill them at sight.

Vorce smiled grimly, touching his horse with his heels and speaking to him, and dashed away at a gallop, vanishing almost instantly from the view of the new-comers, who caught merely a glimpse of him.

But this glimpse was enough for Ready, in the actual circumstances in which he found himself, and he hurriedly ordered a pursuit.

The order was duly obeyed, but one by one his followers came back to him, in the course of the next few minutes, declaring that they could not even discover in what direction their late associate had gone.

"The villain!" cried Ready. "His new recruit's a fraud, and he's another. They've not only aided the prisoners to escape, but there may be still more to discover. Bring your torches, half a dozen of you, and we'll see if everything is as it should be in the cavern."

He led the way into the opening from which Vorce had so recently emerged, but soon came to a halt, becoming white and scared, while he snuffed the air audibly.

"Do you smell that, boys?" he demanded.

A general assent was given him.

"Powder, isn't it?"

No one could deny it.

"Evidently that traitor has been here and burst open our strong boxes," declared Ready, as he resumed progress, entering the gallery Vorce had visited. "Ten to one he has robbed us!"

He broke into a run at the thought, and the men at his heels hastened to follow his example.

The smoke of the recent explosion grew denser as they advanced, and ere long it was so thick that they could not see more than a few yards in any direction.

"All this tells the story," muttered Ready, with a curse. "That fellow has duped us! Why have we been so careless? Why haven't we kept watch here by day and by night?"

He plunged into a narrow passage leading to the opening at the bottom of the gallery, and in

another moment gave utterance to a yell of consternation.

"As you see!" he cried. "The place has been wrecked completely—our iron doors all broken down—our chests all demolished—our treasure all stolen."

It was only too true, as a brief exploration of the rocky chamber told them, with the aid of their torches.

"But what's this, cap'n?" asked one of the robbers as he came to a halt, flashing the rays of his torch ahead of him. "See here!"

He indicated a stick which had been stuck into the ground, and which supported in a cleft at its upper end, a slip of paper, on which a few words had been written with a pencil.

"Evidently a message of some kind," added the robber, as Ready seized the slip of paper. "Possibly it may throw some light upon the situation."

The suggestion was only too well founded. The message thus conveyed to Captain Ready contained merely these words:

"With the compliments of Gordon Vorce."

CHAPTER XL.

THE NEW DEAL.

THE time was getting on toward noon when Sword Bearer made his appearance at the Rolling Tavern, as arranged with Mabel at the moment of their separation.

He was not only more nervous and excited than the girl had ever before seen him, but he seemed unusually tired.

"Where have you been, great chief, since I saw you last?" was the first question she asked him, after the usual conventional greetings, "and what have you been doing?"

"What makes you ask such a question?" demanded the chief. "Do you see anything unusual about me?"

"I certainly do! You look as if you had been digging in the dirt. Your face is begrimed and streaked, as if you had been toiling at some very disagreeable work."

"Such is not the case, I assure you."

"But you have been at work?"

"Yes, and very pleasant and agreeable work it has been."

"Tell me all about it," great chief!"

"In a word then, Star Eyes, we have been building you a house at the Dead Man's Ranch."

"You have?"

The query was not apparently one of unmixed pleasure.

"Well, I wish you had spoken to me on the subject," she added.

"Why so?"

"Because the Dead Man's Ranch belongs to Nick Peddie."

"Oh, he has left it. He's going back to the East."

"But he may sell it to some one."

"It is not likely, Star Eyes. I do not believe there is a fool in the world who is so entirely a fool as to buy it. Is the question of ownership all you have to urge against it?"

"Not at all, great chief. I object to the neighborhood—to the desolation and wildness of the whole scene around us—to the very idea of passing my days in the midst of such surroundings."

The chief looked both hurt and disappointed at these remarks.

"What would you like to do?" he asked.

"Live in a palace, in the midst of one of the greatest cities in the world?"

"Yes; that would suit me exactly. Have you any objections to it?"

"Only this, that I am never at home with the white man," avowed Sword Bearer, as a look of deep gloom mantled his face. "I can never dress like one of your people, or even eat the food which I find in your hotels. A fish out of water is the best hint of indicating what I am whenever I leave the great hills and valleys in which I was born, and in which all my life has been spent."

Mabel saw that he was quite in earnest.

His face was a picture of misery.

"Well, well," she hastened to say, "if that is the way you feel about it, I am afraid you ought not to leave your 'Roost.' It is well, therefore, that you have built a house for us. I will go and look at it in the morning."

"Why not now?" suggested Sword Bearer, with a childlike eagerness.

"Because I am too tired."

Her real reason was that she was too anxious to carry out her plot to be willing to delay a moment.

"Well, do as you wish, Star Eyes," assented the chief. "If we remain here, we are sure to have plenty of neighbors. I see Captain Haskell, instead of going away to the railway, has come to a halt at the edge of the Black Rock woods."

"He has? On what intent?"

"It's hard to say."

"Do you think the rescue of Mr. Hamlin was the one great object of Haskell's presence in this vicinity?"

"There can be no doubt of that."

"Then why don't he go away as soon as that result has been obtained?"

"Any answer I could give you, Star Eyes, would be worthless, inasmuch as it would be mere guess-work."

"Is it not odd that Haskell and the robbers have never had a battle, that there does not seem to be the least ill-will between them?"

"Yes, it's odd," admitted Sword Bearer, "and all the more so because it's as plain as day that Haskell would like to get rid of the Red Ransomers. That he even intends to get rid of them sooner or later is morally certain. But he'll hardly venture to attack the robbers until Mr. Hamlin has been escorted to some place of safety."

Mabel assented to these views; they certainly were reasonable.

"But what are your views concerning the Red Ransomers, great chief?" demanded the girl after a pause. "Are you pleased to have these robbers in your reservation?"

The look with which Sword Bearer received this question was highly significant.

It was such a look as a culprit might assume on being asked if he were not in a hurry to be hanged.

"I hate them more than words can tell you, Star Eyes," he declared, "and I would have cleaned them out long ago—if I hadn't possessed two excellent reasons for leaving them alone!"

"Name them!"

"One is that these men are a sort of bulwark between me and the soldiers, or between me and the Government."

"And the second?"

"The second is that they're pulling my chestnuts out of the fire!"

Mabel looked at her ardent wooer searchingly, and even pressed nearer to his side, with an air of pretended confidence, but she didn't quite comprehend his meaning.

"I mean," he said, in answer to her mute appeal, "that Captain Ready and his men have accumulated a great deal of treasure in one of their hiding-places, and I am watching them as a cat watches a mouse. At the right time, I propose to make a clean sweep of all they possess, and wipe them out, or at least all of them who do not save themselves by a timely retreat."

As if in response to his menace, Captain Ready was seen approaching rapidly at that moment.

He was mounted upon one of his best horses.

His face was flushed, and his whole mien excited and annoyed.

The chief and Mabel saw that something had gone wrong with him.

Naturally enough, the girl's first thought was that Ready was jealous of Sword Bearer, but this view was seen at a glance to have no foundation.

"Were you looking for me?" she asked, after an exchange of salutations.

"Not at all," answered the leader of the Red Ransomers with almost brutal frankness, "but for a couple of persons who have slipped through my fingers."

"You refer to Mr. Hamlin, of course?"

"And also to his daughter!"

"Ah! he has a daughter?" queried Mabel, with a new and intense interest.

"Yes, the most charming girl I have ever seen!"

This declaration caused Mabel to bestow a very especial glance upon him; but she saw that he had not spoken with any invidious intentions; he had simply made a careless slip.

In other terms, he was under the spell of a new infatuation.

The flush which swept over the face of Mabel at this recognition was very much like a flush of jealousy.

"And where is this paragon of loveliness?" she asked.

"She has gone to Haskell's camp."

He proceeded to set forth briefly the circumstances under which he had made the acquaintance of Alice Hamlin, as also those under which she and her friends had turned their backs on him, and taken refuge in the military camp.

"A bad situation for you," was Sword Bearer's comment on these confidences. "You'll have to give it all up as a bad job—both your attempt to extract a ransom from the father and to woo the daughter!"

"Never!" declared Captain Ready. "They've merely tricked me—not escaped me!"

"How can you get hold of them again?" demanded Mabel.

"I thought Sword Bearer would be willing to join me in an attack on these intruders. They are certainly as much in his way as in mine!"

The chief smiled a little sarcastically, as he put his arm protectively around Mabel Barter, at the same time shaking his head slowly to Captain Ready's proposition.

"I've other use for my braves," he declared. "Besides, I have no quarrel whatever with Captain Haskell. I may even say that he is a good fellow and that he has promised to look after our subsidies and supplies!"

"Well, if such is the case, Sword Bearer," returned the chief of the Red Ransomers, con-

cealing his chagrin as much as possible, "I shall have to fight my own battles. Fortunately, I see my way to carrying the desired point, and will lose no time in doing so!"

He saluted the couple in a style which could have hardly been called polished, and then put spurs to his horse, riding away at a gallop.

CHAPTER XLI.

CAPTAIN READY IN THE DARK.

ONCE out of the sight of Sword Bearer and Mabel, Captain Ready drew his horse to a walk, with watchful glances in every direction around him.

"That was as good a way of explaining my excitement as if I had given them all my reasons," he muttered. "What would they say if they knew the truth?"

He had not gone far before he encountered his favorite henchman—the robber known as Dan, and who had announced himself to Nick as a Prairie Kitten.

The fellow was anything but kitten-like in his aspect and manners at the present moment.

"Seen anything?" was the query of Captain Ready, as he came to a halt.

"Nothing whatever," was the answer.

"And yet I can swear that I am not mistaken," declared the Red Ransomer, nervously.

"The man we have known and had dealings with as Dave Wilder is none other than Gordon Vorce."

"But what if he is?" asked Dan. "What does this masquerading signify?"

Ready stared at his follower a moment in silence, and with a half-angry air, and then responded:

"I see that I shall have to be frank with you, Dan. During that early morning visit I paid to Miss Hamlin and the old cat who is with her, they were both so sure of soon getting out of my clutches that I could do no less than feel uneasy. I brooded all day over what they had said to me during that interview, and then it occurred to me to visit the cave which has so long been the storehouse of our treasures."

The mien of Captain Ready was so excited that his hearer could not have failed to become deeply serious as to the cause of that excitement, and hence he refrained from asking a single question, leaving the captain at liberty to continue.

"You will remember that one of the latest measures we took for the safe-keeping of our money and valuables was to sprinkle the floor of the cave with ashes, thereby rendering ourselves morally certain of detecting the footprints of any one who should intrude?"

"Yes, I remember this scheme," declared Dan, "and you may remember the little faith I had in it!"

"I do indeed, and it seems that you were quite right in your estimate of the character of that proceeding."

"How so?"

"Why, the ashes on the floor of the cavern did not seem to have been at all disturbed, and yet the cave had been as completely divested of everything valuable as if a cyclone had turned it inside out!"

It was now Dan's turn to look troubled.

He stood speechless a moment, scanning his surroundings as carefully as if he expected every bush to turn into an enemy.

"Do you mean to say," he at length asked, "that the Mortimer treasure was gone?"

Captain Ready assented.

"Also the Quigley?"

Another nod.

"And those valuables we took from the fugitive jeweler?"

"Everything we have taken for two years past, and which had not been otherwise disposed of—absolutely everything," assured Captain Ready. "You could have knocked me down with a feather when I realized what had happened."

"But how do you explain that there were no tracks in the ashes?"

"By the fact that the thief had been enlightened beforehand on the ash question, and had taken the trouble, as well as the precaution, to put down a new sprinkling of the same after he had literally emptied the cavern!"

These declarations of the robber chief require little explanation.

It is enough to say that the robbers had been robbed—not of a few solitary articles, such as a man could carry off on one occasion, but on scores of occasions, extending over many months—and that Dave and Dan were the robbers!

"And you think Dave Wilder is the author of these robberies?" asked Dan.

"I do."

"And why so?"

"For two reasons."

"Let's hear them."

"The first is that Dave has been absent almost constantly for a number of weeks past."

"And the second?"

"The second is that I have caught a glimpse of Gordon Vorce on several occasions, when he was hanging around the camp, and on two occasions I have barely missed his capture."

"But who and what is this Gordon Vorce, and what are his relations to you, if I may be

so bold as to inquire?" asked Dan, with a very peculiar and singular smile playing upon his half-averted features.

"I will tell you. Listen."

The captain proceeded to set forth the facts in the case as they are known to the reader.

"An odd case, to be sure," commented Dan, "and I do not wonder that you stand in some bodily apprehension of the man who has suffered so much from your career as the 'black horse-man.' But it certainly ought to be an easy thing for you to get track of him, and to make an end forever of all you have to fear from him!"

"Well, we will at least hope for success in our search," said Captain Ready. "If you'll take a turn through the great pinery as you go back, I will do as much for the Frost Queen Valley."

And with this they rode their separate ways.

"The poor dupe," muttered Dan, looking after his chief. "So he thinks Dave Wilder is the robber! I wonder what would be his emotions if he were to learn or discover that one of the mysterious robbers in this case is really me?"

CHAPTER XLII.

THE CONSPIRATORS.

FOR a few minutes Dan rode along with an air which would have struck an observer as being very rank with self-congratulation.

"Here we are," he then muttered.

He had reached the edge of a pond not far from forty rods across, and which had in its center a small, circular island which was densely wooded.

Reining his horse into this pond, Dan traversed a causeway, which was evidently artificial, and upon which there was scarcely three inches of water, proceeding to the island of which we have spoken.

He had barely reached it when a man aroused himself from a recumbent posture in the midst of the trees by which it was shaded, and approached him, with an air of eagerness and interest.

"You don't know how impatiently I've been waiting for you, Dan," declared this personage. "You are an hour late, at least. I was afraid some discovery had been made by Ready or that something had gone wrong."

"Well, the fellow has at last missed his treasure," replied Dan, "and for several hours past he has been having a hot search for it."

"In vain, of course?"

"Yes, but still he has some suspicions which are more or less to the point. We'll have to be getting out of this neighborhood, and the sooner the better. I must even be candid enough to add that you have fallen under very serious suspicions."

"I, Dan?"

"Yes, you, Dave. To begin with, he regards you as the robber, for the simple reason that you have been so much absent lately and made so many mysterious journeys!"

"Why didn't you tell him I am innocent, Dan?" asked Dave, dryly.

"I have indeed dropped one or two remarks to that effect, Dave, and another to the effect that Sword Bearer is the guilty party," declared Dan, "but I must say that my suggestions have not met with much success."

"What's the reason?"

"Well, the principal reason seems to be that the cave has been robbed as late as last evening and that he saw you near it."

"A very good one, to be sure," said Dave. "Is he a good deal upset by his discovery?"

"Yes, a good deal," avowed Dan, "and I do not much wonder at it. It's no small matter, after years of such dreams as he has had, to suddenly awaken to the fact that there is a traitor in his camp, and that his hard-stolen booty has slipped through his fingers."

The cheerful whinny of a horse resounded at this moment within a few rods of the two men, and from the midst of a small dense grove which covered the center of the island.

"Ah, he wants to be moving, too," commented Dave. "Did the captain say anything about the missing horses?"

"Yes, but nothing of any moment. He has no suspicion that we have run them off to this retreat."

"Why should he have?"

"True enough. I flatter myself we have been very clever in this matter," said Dan. "We've not only run them off one at a time, but we have taken good care to act when there was a flurry from wolves, or when some general movement was under foot, so that it has been possible to offer a dozen plausible explanations."

Dave assented, and led the way to the horse which had announced its presence.

This animal was not only a magnificent, but he was one of four which the two conspirators had in their possession.

"You've had no alarm in my absence, I suppose?" resumed Dan.

"Not the least, why should I have? I doubt if a single member of our band save ourselves has ever been here. There is no boat on the

pond, and the water is supposed to be very deep, as indeed it is upon every side except the spot where we have filled it up at the cost of so much labor."

"All very true, Dave," said Dan, "but I am none the less inclined to leave these scenes forever immediately."

"Quite right," was the response. "I am only too anxious to be moving. Having got all we ever expect to get, what earthly reason have we for hanging around here a moment longer?"

"None, certainly. I'm ready to start at any moment, if none of the Red Ransomers are stirring in this direction. Let's hitch up immediately."

The four magnificent horses were duly harnessed, and then they were led toward a small building on wheels which had been modeled after the Rolling Tavern, and which was a very close copy of it!

It even bore the name.

What has been said already has, of course, given the reader an insight into the situation.

Dave and Dan, while carrying on the affairs of the Red Ransomers with special reference to all the band, had also taken the trouble to carry them on with especial reference to themselves and to their own pecuniary advantage.

In other terms, they had taken possession of the strange little island under our notice, and had not only built the causeway by which they reached it, but they had made this spot the basis of their plot against the strong-box of the brotherhood.

With zeal, energy and patience they had carried the treasure of the robbers to this island, storing it away in that strange imitation of the Rolling Tavern, and the scene that interior now presented was one of the most singular which was ever presented to mortal attention.

This imitation "Rolling Tavern" was literally crammed with treasure!

"And now to understand what we are doing," said Dan, as the couple began hitching their horses to this house on wheels. "We are going to roll away from this island, and keep on rolling to the eastward, with the intention of being at least seventy-five miles from here by daylight to-morrow morning. It is not in vain I think, that we have ridden over our proposed route again and again during the summer. I think I know just how to get clear of the land of the Red Ransomers!"

"The same here," returned Dave, "and it would be strange if we didn't. My idea is to get out of this nest in safety, and to proceed to some corner of the world where such treasures as are now in our possession can be turned to account!"

"That's the idea," declared Dan, with calm earnestness. "As near as I can figure the value of our huddle, we are now the possessors of millions."

Thus discussing their plans, and rejoicing at the situation, the couple finished the task of attaching their four horses to the strange vehicle, and were ready for departure.

"Now for it!" cried Dan. "Be the result for good or evil, we at least have a fair start!"

CHAPTER XLIII.

HOW MABEL'S PLANS RESULTED.

THE chief of the Red Ransomers had scarcely taken leave of Mabel and Sword Bearer, as related, when the latter said:

"As soon as we have taken possession of our new abode, I shall have a few words to say to that man, Star Eyes. I am getting tired of the very sight of him!"

"I can say as much," declared the girl, with a countenance which was a picture of wrath and annoyance. "I think it would be wise to clean them out of your lands, and be rid of them forever!"

Passing her arms around the burly figure of her wooer, with that pretense of affection she so well knew how to assume, she drew him toward the lean-to, where sat her father and mother.

Greetings were exchanged, and Sword Bearer accepted the chair Mabel offered him.

"All this while," she said in her most wheedling voice, "I am forgetful that the day has been very warm, and that you have had a great deal to do!"

She proceeded to stir up the punch she had taught him to appreciate so highly, partly by pretending to him that it was endowed with extraordinary virtues, and in a few minutes he was getting far redder in the face with it than was necessary for his comfort.

"Where are your people, Sword Bearer?" asked Mrs. Barter, after a considerable pause. "You do not seem to have brought any of them with you?"

"They are all still at work at the house," he replied. "I do not expect to see any of them here until morning!"

Mrs. Barter understood him.

She knew quite enough of the chief and his people to realize that it entered into his designs to have a tremendous "blow out" on the morrow.

Thus far, in all her own acquaintance with the chief and that of Mabel, they had been able to "manage" him.

How long would such be the case when he had once gone through the rude ceremonies which were held by his people to constitute a marriage?

Drawing her husband one side, under pretense of cleaning out a spring, she proceeded to ease her mind of a number of thoughts which were little less than a burden.

"Of course we have no occasion to remain another night in this vicinity," she declared, "now that we have secured possession of all that money!"

"Certainly not," was the response. "The one aim to which all our thoughts must be directed is—*escape*! We must get clear alike of the red-skins and of the Red Ransomers!"

"Agreed, and nothing is easier," replied Mrs. Barter, "as far as I can now see. Sword Bearer has come here alone, and he seems to have been engaged in some unusual exercise. Most assuredly he is more thirsty than usual. Mabel has just given him a second punch!"

"And it was understood that she would make them twice as strong as usual, so it cannot be long before we shall have him out of the way."

"In the mean time," said the wife, "why not be quietly hitching up your four horses and preparing to act rapidly when the road becomes open?"

"Quite right," was the response. "There is no necessity of losing a moment."

By the time two or three punches had disappeared down the throat of Sword Bearer in rapid succession, it was easy to see that they were taking effect upon him.

His speech became thick, at the same time that his manner became boisterous and effusive.

Mabel began to wish herself well out of the scene upon which she had entered.

In due course, however, the tongue of the warrior became more and more unwieldy, and it was not long before his head became too heavy to hold, as was proven by the frequency with which it descended upon his breast.

"Another," was the thought of the fair plotter, when his tumbler was once more empty.

"And this time—"

She did not venture to shape the hideous thought in words, but she none the less poured into his drink a powerful drug which she had more than once used to reduce him to helplessness.

The result can be foreseen.

Ere long he lay at her feet as one dead.

At a gesture she made, her parents drew near and contemplated the sleeper.

"You can leave him to us," then said the old man. "We know just what to do with him!"

Ascending to the top of the Rolling Tavern, with a powerful glass in his hand, he bent a long glance in every direction around him.

Not a form! not a movement!

None of the Crows were within sight.

Descending to the ground, he assisted his wife in placing the burly figure of Sword Bearer upon the floor of the kitchen.

"Get ready now to leave, both of you," he said to his wife and daughter, as he proceeded to hitch the horses to the Rolling Tavern. "Perhaps you have not remarked that bit of prairie about a hundred rods to the south of us. There is a depression there that renders the soil damp, and the grass has grown very luxuriantly. It must have grown to the height of ordinary oats, and is as dry as tinder. It is there that we will leave him."

"And his horse, papa?" suggested Mabel.

"We had better leave it where it is!" he replied. "It would not do for us to be seen with it, especially *after*—"

He finished with a look which spoke volumes, and his wife and daughter understood him.

Nothing more was said until the horses had been fully secured to the Rolling Tavern, and Barter had taken his place as driver.

"We are still unobserved," he remarked, after another long glance around. "This is as it should be!"

With this they started.

The ponderous load had sunk considerably in the yielding soil, but the four stout horses had no difficulty about handling it, and in another moment were in motion at a rapid trot toward that depression in the prairie which had fixed the old man's attention.

It continued to creak and surge on its way, as much to the delight of the three plotters as to their relief.

A groan or two came from the unconscious chief, as a result of the shaking he received from the movements of the vehicle, but a glance at him was enough to attest that he was still utterly oblivious of all his surroundings.

The face of Mabel gradually grew livid with impatience and excitement.

"Can you not go faster?" she suddenly exclaimed, as if she had begun to be nervous with the dreadful thoughts to which she was a prey.

"Don't worry, child," enjoined the mother, with a stolidity of bearing she had seldom been known to lose. "The distance is so short—"

"Silence!" interrupted the driver, touching up his horses gently with a whip. "I want to think!"

A stiff breeze caught up his few locks of long straggling hair at that moment, tossing them here and there, but he did not notice the fact, nor was it noticed by either the mother or daughter. "Look again, mother," he enjoined, after another brief pause, "and see if my one is in sight."

Mrs. Barter complied. "Not a soul!" she announced. "Then all is as it should be," declared the husband again. "How fortunate it is that the chief has given us all that money in paper without either gold or silver! It will not make us any trouble about carrying it when we conclude to take leave of the tavern!"

Mr. Barter assented with a nod, while Mabel contemplated the long, thick prairie grass in which the strange vehicle was now moving. "Is it not about time to act, father?" she asked abruptly.

"Yes, girl. Will you take my place at the reins a few minutes, or shall we leave it to your mother?"

"You, mamma?" gasped the girl. She was so nervous that it is doubtful if she could have held the reins.

The moment Mrs. Barter had assumed the part of driver, the old man hastened to tumble the insensible figure of Sword Bearer into the long grass they were traversing.

"You go quietly on," he said, as he leaped to the ground, and as soon as you are at a suitable distance, I will start the fire!"

"A little to the windward of the chief, of course?" murmured Mabel.

"Naturally, so as to bring down upon him the necessary volume of heat and fire!"

By the time the Rolling Tavern was a hundred yards to the leeward of Sword Bearer the old man had retraced his steps about that distance in the opposite direction.

Once more he bent a sweeping glance in every direction.

"Not a soul," he repeated. Then he held up his hand to the breeze to note its strength and direction.

"It is rather strong," he muttered, "and blows a little more directly on our route than I supposed, but I reckon we can keep out of the way."

He bent low into the grass, striking a match, which he protected a few moments from the breeze by his burly frame, and then he inserted it in the long sea of matted grass upon which he was standing.

The result startled him. It was as if he had inserted that match in a tinder box.

The whole prairie seemed ablaze on the instant.

CHAPTER XLIV.

THE FIRE NEMESIS.

It was only by running with all his might that Barter was able to resume his place on the vehicle before the flames overtook him.

"Heavens! What a sight!" cried Mabel involuntarily. "I had no idea that grass was so dry!"

"Nor I," exclaimed the mother. "Look sharp now," enjoined the old man, panting for breath, as he caught the reins from the hands of his wife. "We must go faster than this, or we shall not keep out of the way!"

There was no need to press the high-spirited horses he was handling.

The smoke and the heat of the burning grass had already entered their nostrils, and they seemed to have a far juster sense of the situation than their driver and those with him.

The Rolling Tavern was soon going at an easy trot and held its own in such a way that the nervous and apprehensive feeling to which the old man had given utterance was subdued, even if it did not wholly vanish.

A mile was thus left behind, when a wild cry of wonder—consternation even—suddenly burst from the lips of Mabel.

It was as if she had encountered some terrible apparition!

Their eyes followed the indication of her outstretched hand.

What they saw fairly froze the blood in their veins.

With a wild roar and rumble, with tremendous swaying from side to side, came bearing down upon them a second Rolling Tavern!

A vehicle and a horse so much like those occupied by the Barters that it seemed a reflection of it!

As fast as it was moving, the wind, fire and smoke behind it were moving still faster.

"Ah! the fire is gaining upon us!" gasped Barter. "The wind seems to have freshened to a cyclone! And this thing behind us!"

He was interrupted by a sudden increase of speed on the part of his horses, which had taken fright at the approach of that second Rolling Tavern behind them.

They broke away like furies, and in another moment had taken the bits in their teeth and were wholly beyond control of their driver.

Such, too, was already the case with Dan and Dave Wilder, who had already given up all hopes of getting out of their peril alive.

"Look out, there!" exclaimed Mrs. Barter abruptly, as she gesticulated wildly to the new-

comer. "Don't you see that you are gaining upon us and running us down! Careful!"

In vain Dan and Dave made every effort to avert the threatened disaster—all in vain!

Their horses were too terrified to make the least response to all the pressure that could be brought to bear upon them.

In a few moments, therefore, the two Rolling Taverns had crashed together, locking wheels, and the next instant descended with a grand crash upon the prairie.

A moment Mabel found herself flying through the air, and at the same time saw her parents dashed headlong under the house which had so long been their abode.

By a desperate effort, and especially by moving in time, Dan and Dave Wilder were able to avoid being caught under their house or the truck it stood upon, and in another moment they were hastening on foot in a course sufficiently at right angles to their former one to eventually find themselves in a position of safety.

As fast as they hurried, however, they did not fail to note a terrible spectacle which was suddenly presented behind them.

It was that of Sword Bearer, who had been aroused from his drunken stupor by the sea of fire and smoke which came rolling over him, but not until his hair was singed from his head and the cuticle from his features—in a word, until he had been rendered one of the most frightful objects to look upon, which can possibly be imagined.

As fortune would have it, his horse had made its escape at the right moment and fled to him with some instinct of securing its own safety at his hands, or perhaps merely as the result of the careful training of which it had been the object.

Be all that as it may, the fact remains that he was able to secure his steed at the right moment, and it was like a flying incarnation of terror and horror that the chief came dashing down past the spot which had been so fatal to the two Rolling Taverns.

Need we linger upon what succeeded?

A few days after the events we have narrated, a party of soldiers traversed the scene of the catastrophe, and discovered three half-charred bodies, which were made out to be those of the Barters.

Their plot had been fatal only to themselves, for Sword Bearer, although terribly burned, was not seriously endangered by his wild ride in the midst of the sea of fire in which they had designed him to perish.

Need we relate how Captain Haskell and his men were able to effect an entrance into the camp of the Red Ransomers, with the aid of Gordon Vorce, otherwise "Dave Wilder," who had familiarized himself with all its features, and how Captain Ready and more than three-fourths of his followers were annihilated?

Or is it necessary to say that Nick Peddie showed such fire and courage on the occasion of Miss Hamlin's rescue as to fix her favorable attention, and that the fates and fortunes of the young couple have since been happily blended in marriage?

As could have been expected the Red Ransomers accused Sword Bearer and his band of having robbed them of their treasures, while the red-skins were equally positive that the robbers had gathered in the money given to Mabel by her infatuated wooer.

As a matter of fact, both were wrong, as the reader has seen.

Both fortunes were reduced to ashes in the flames which destroyed the two taverns, and whatever fragments of specie or bullion were found by roving Indians were duly carried away by them, and not a word was said in regard to its source or former owners.

We have only to add that Mr. Hamlin secured in due course the fortune he had buried on the line of the Union Pacific, and that in due course he was restored to the arms of his faithful wife, and that all their subsequent days have been filled with as much peace and happiness as usually falls to the lot of mortals.

And, as to the unlucky red-skin, his fate was soon determined by the little war he had inaugurated, for on the first conflict with the troops he was shot, and that ended an uprising which, had the wily chief been spared, might have proven something more than a reservation escapade.

THE END.

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